

Songs my mother taught me: new light on James Macpherson's *Ossian*¹

IAN WOODFIELD

In 1808, in the final stages of preparing the second volume of his collection of Irish music, Edward Bunting decided to write to Charles Burney with a list of last-minute questions.² The letter was politely phrased and emphasized that should any assistance be offered, scholarly conventions would be scrupulously observed:

Sir

Having devoted 14 or 15 years of my Life in preparing for the Public, the entire Body of the Antient Irish Melodies, my anxiety to render the publication as Complete as possible, will I trust plead my excuse in the Trouble of this Letter.

Among other general Matters, tending to throw light on Antient, Welsh, Irish, & Scotch Music, may I beg your reple to the following Questions. Of your name, no other use shall be made than you give full & explicit permission for.

1st What is your opinion with respect to the authenticity of Bruces Harp, since Denons account of those he saw at Thebes; & reasons for that opinion.

2nd From whence do you conceive that Ireland had its harp in any form, & when did it take its present one?

3rd Your opinion concerning the comparative antiquity of the Welsh & Scotch Music, Instruments etc.

4th Your opinion with respect to what is the Characteristic Differences, in composition, between the old Irish Melodies, and those of Wales and Scotland.

I have to request that any communication you are kindly inclined to make, may be soon as the work in Question is in forwardness for the Press.

I am Sir with great Respect

Y^r faithful & obed^t S^t

Edw^d Bunting

¹ I am most grateful to an anonymous reader for creative suggestions on a draft of this article.

² Edward Bunting, *A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, vol. 2 (London: Clementi & Co., 1809).

Belfast

Aug^t 12th 1808³

Bunting, of course, was well aware that the question of the relative antiquity of the musical traditions of Scotland, Wales and Ireland was a minefield of contentious issues. That each nation could claim a colourful repertoire of song and a distinctive contribution to the *instrumentarium* of the region went without saying, but behind these acknowledged riches lay sensitive issues of chronology. Any claim of cultural precedence and thus of greater authenticity would have to be adjudicated with care: both Ireland and Wales, for example, could claim traditions of harping extending back into the mists of antiquity.⁴

No topic was more hotly contested, though, than the nature of the relationship between Irish and Scottish oral culture. With the publication in 1762 of *Fingal*, the ancient epic poem James Macpherson claimed to have reconstructed from Erse sources, scholarly warfare broke out. The hitherto unassailable Irish bard Oisín was unexpectedly confronted with a rival Scottish claimant to the authorship of the Fionn Mac Cumhaill saga: Ossian. A consensus quickly emerged among outraged Irish antiquarians that Macpherson was a very clever fraudster who had ‘usurped the Fenian cycles of Gaelic Ireland’ for commercial gain.⁵ The controversy refused to die down, and half a century later there was still no final verdict on the alleged hoax. A major report commissioned by the Highland Society of Scotland was published in 1805, followed by Sir John Sinclair’s *Dissertation* in 1806.⁶ In his first volume, Bunting had said nothing about Scottish music, but the renewed debate could not be ignored,

³ All transcriptions retain the spelling of the original documents. Edward Bunting, letter to Charles Burney, 12 August 1808. Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Osborn MSS 3, Box 2, Folder 154. I am very grateful to the staff at the Beinecke Library for supplying scans of the letters used in this study in a helpful and efficient manner.

⁴ In the end, Burney remained firmly on the fence on this issue. Charles Burney, ‘Harp’, in Abraham Rees, *Cyclopaedia*, vol. 17 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1819): ‘Whether the Welsh had their music from Ireland ... or the Irish from the Cambro-Britains, we shall not attempt to determine, but shall leave St. David and St. Patrick, and their champions Jones and Walker, patriotically to dispute the point.’

⁵ Harry White, ‘Macpherson, Ossian and the Bardic Ideal’, *De musica disserenda* 12 /1 (2016), 109–119: 111.

⁶ Henry Mackenzie, *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, appointed to inquire into the nature and authenticity of the Poems of Ossian, drawn up, according to the directions of the committee, by Henry Mackenzie* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1805). Sir John Sinclair, *A Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (London: W. Bulmer, 1806).

and this was surely the reason why he approached Burney for his latest views, despite the imminence of his own publication.⁷

In his draft reply, dated 2 September 1808, Burney maintained his long-held conviction that some Scottish airs were of great antiquity. Hoping to convince Bunting of this, he described a chance meeting that he had had with the poet James Macpherson in the home of the Earl of Eglinton. The encounter must have taken place soon after Burney's move from King's Lynn to London in 1760, the year in which Macpherson published his first volume of translations from Erse sources entitled *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*,⁸ but before the appearance of *Fingal* in 1762. The document is transcribed in full here, as it offers a rare account of Macpherson's handling of material gathered from an oral source, even if hardly a typical one:

2n^d Sept^r 1808

For Welsh Music – see Hist. Mus. Vol. II. p.351

Saxon & Danish – ib. 352 et seq

I never c^d subscribe to the wild assertions of Giraldus Cambrensis, though all the writers on Music in Ireland fly to his works as if they were Gospels.

In the first prospectus of my gen.^l Hist. Mus. I believe there was a promise that National Music w^d make a part of the work; and I during many years ^l collected from every part of the civilized world melodies for that purpose ~~and~~ ^{of these} had accumulated a sufficient number ^{to} fill a 4^{to} Vol. but having extended my labours to 4 Vol^s 4^{to} w^{ch} at first I thought might be comprised in 2, and finding but few ~~of the~~ melodies out of Europe w^{ch} c^d improve our own, and that the trouble and expense w^d be greater than the renumeration: as the vol. w^d perhaps be purchased only by a few speculative students and collectors of music, & universities, I dropt the Idea.

With respect to the high antiquity of Scottish melodies, if you will take the trouble ^{to} reading the article in Vol. III of my Hist. of Music, beginning p. 217, you will see my reasons for not believing that David Rizzio was the original author of the melodies of any of the Scotch tunes ascribed to him. Nor the prince of Venosa, nor James the First of Scotland, who was a prisoner 18 years in Windsor Castle. I regard the national tunes of Scotland as traditional, from very high antiquity, not composed by a regular bred Musician who knew the Gammut or scale of Guido ^{invented} in the eleventh century. &

⁷ It was common knowledge that Burney had been working on a comparative study. In the second volume of his *General History*, he wrote: 'It is not meant to speak here of those wild and irregular Melodies which come within the description of *National Music*; such as the old and rustic tunes of Wales, Scotland and Ireland ... Of this kind of artless Music, which is best learned in the nursery and the street, I shall speak with due reverence hereafter; and at present confine my disquisitions to *real Music*.' Charles Burney, *A General History of Music, from the Earliest Ages to the Present period*, vol. 2 (London: Printed for the Author and sold by J. Robson, 1782), 220. This promise was never fulfilled.

⁸ James Macpherson, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Galic or Erse language* (Edinburgh: G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1760).

meeting Mr Macpherson accidentally at the Earl of Eglinton's (Geo. [?]) before he published the poems ascribed to Ossian, he was desired to sing me two or three of the old melodies w^{ch} he had learned of his mother, who sung them to words in the Erse language (she knew ~~no other~~ not the alphabet of any other). Mr M. complied, and I was so pleased with them ~~them~~ as to wish for a copy; but he s^d they had never been committed to paper – “indeed (he adds) I am quite ignorant of Music, and unacquainted with anyone that was able to write down ^{these tunes} from his mother's singing on his own.” I then s^d if he w^d be so good to sing them once more, and had no objection to their being imbodyed, I w^d record ~~them~~ them in musical notes, and there being no music-paper at hand, I ruled some plain writing paper, & wrote down 3 – 2 of w^{ch} I believe have never yet been printed. Mr Macpherson said that he ^{first} wrote down the words his mother sung in the Erse language, & then translated them into Engl. in the same measure, to suit her tunes. These melodies, though in the style of other old scotch tunes, are rather less wild; & though ^{in them}, [unclear deletion] like ~~them~~ & genuin old Chinese Airs, no semitones are to be found, they w^d admit of a base, and even a 2^d treble and tenor p^t with rather less difficulty than the ^{generality of} unadulterated old Scottish airs.

I have given you this long detail, to convince you, ~~that~~ that I have not changed my opinion as to the high antiquity of Scotch national tunes, w^{ch} must have long preceded cultivated music and the scale on Gammut ascribed to Guido. All that Rizzio did was to write down several old tunes from hearing them sung by the natives, as I did from hearing Mr M.

But of this acc^t of the foundation of my opinion of the antiquity of Scotch tunes, for w^{ch} you seemed to challenge me, I must desire you to take no notice – you may quote the several passages in my Hist^y to w^{ch} I have referred, by saying – [we find in D^r Burney's Hist^y of Music – whatever you may think worth quoting without encroaching on any article w^{ch} I have written expressly for the new Cyclopedia of D^r Rees.

I am Sir

Your faithful & humble Ser^t

C.B.

P.S. The ~~passage~~ Doctrines to w^{ch} D^r B. alludes at the beginning of his letter, of Giraldus Cambrensis, may be found in the II^d Vol. of his Hist^y of Music, p.

To Mr Bunting of Belfast, Sept^r 24th 1808⁹

Macpherson's sensational claim was that he had been able to reconstruct *Fingal*, an epic from the Age of Ossian and a work to rival Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* in importance, from authentic Erse sources.¹⁰ Some texts were already in his possession, but many more were collected during two research trips to the Highlands and Islands,

⁹ Charles Burney, draft letter to Edward Bunting, 24 September 1808. Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Osborn MSS 3, Box 3, Folder 203.

¹⁰ James Macpherson, *Fingal, an ancient epic poem in six books: together with several other poems, composed by Ossian the son of Fingal. Translated from the Galic language, by James Macpherson* (London: T. Becket and P. A. de Hondt, 1762), preface.

sponsored by a group of supporters after the success of *Fragments*. Despite its huge impact, *Fingal* quickly aroused suspicions as to its authenticity. Macpherson's refusal (or inability) to produce convincing written sources left him wide open to accusations of fraud: to put it bluntly, his critics believed that he had written it himself, presenting his original work as though it were a translation. In short, no such saga had ever existed.¹¹

Burney's account of the meeting does not resolve the central question of authenticity. It does, however, shed significant light on the role of traditional musical performances in Macpherson's acquisition of material. It suggests that his English translations of the songs his mother Ellen sang to him were fashioned in such a way as to enable a musical rendition in the new language, using her original tunes. That is significant information, as he was later accused of translating his own 'translations' back into Gaelic; poor transcription skills rather than an inability to translate from English into Erse may thus in some instances explain their indifferent quality. In any event, even though he was able to sing some airs himself from memory, the production of song texts in English was not his primary concern. In the preface to *Fragments*, his friend Hugh Blair, writing on his behalf, was categorical in identifying his translations as poems: 'they are not set to music, nor sung'.¹² In explaining the method of translation, Blair (without mentioning music) laid great stress on the exact nature of Macpherson's English renditions: 'The translation is extremely literal. Even the arrangement of the words in the original has been imitated; to which must be imputed some inversions in the style, that otherwise would not have been chosen'. These sentiments were repeated by Macpherson himself (again without mentioning

¹¹ There is an extensive recent literature on Ossian, prompted by a renewal of scholarly interest towards the end of the last century. See Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988) and Howard Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991). For a summary of the state of research at the turn of the millennium, see James Porter, "'Bring me the Head of James Macpherson": the Execution of Ossian and the Wellsprings of Folkloristic Discourse', *The Journal of American Folklore* 114 (Autumn 2001), 396–435. On the musical influence of Ossian, see James Porter, *Beyond Fingal's Cave: Ossian in the Musical Imagination* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2019). Recent scholarship has tended to look favourably upon Macpherson, rejecting the idea of an outright fraud on his part. It stresses, for example, that in the 1760s, the mechanisms through which oral traditions were sustained, as well as their relationship with the written materials eventually generated, were still very poorly understood. On the question of forgery more generally, see Karen McAulay, *Our Ancient National Airs: Scottish Song Collecting from the Enlightenment to the Romantic Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 105–28.

¹² Macpherson, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, preface, vi.

music) in his *Fingal* 'Dissertation': 'All that can be said of the translation is, that it is literal, and that simplicity is studied. The arrangement of the words in the original is imitated, and the inversions of the style observed'.¹³ Insofar as it was possible, Macpherson was thus aiming for a corpus of poetry based on word-for-word rendition, the most obvious consequence of which was a style with many inversions of word order. An explanation for this choice is that he wanted to ensure that his Ossianic poetry read like the translation it was claimed to be; the abundance of inversion was a way in which Gaelic structures could be allowed 'to shimmer through the surface of the target language'.¹⁴

When Bunting wrote to Burney, he promised that he would make use of his comments only if given permission to do so. In response, the celebrated historian, aware perhaps that the account of his meeting with Macpherson might be of wider interest, placed an embargo on it, the reason being that he had already submitted material to the Rees *Cyclopaedia*.¹⁵ This was eventually incorporated as a loose addendum to the lengthy entry on the Ossian controversy. It did not appear until 1819, five years after Burney's death, while the tunes he transcribed around 1760 had to wait until 1820, when they were finally published in the third volume of the *Cyclopaedia's* plates. The account made public in 1819 contains further details, notably that the texts in question were Ossianic:

Some forty years ago, meeting Mr. Macpherson at the earl of Eglinton's, who prevailed on him to sing two or three airs that he had learned of his mother, who knew neither English nor music: but in the same manner as our villagers keep alive the babes in the wood, and chevy chace, by tradition, she sung, in the Erse language, melodies to the words of Ossian, which her son had translated and adapted to the measures and melodies of his mother's singing. The French, the Italians, and the Germans, having no doubts of the authenticity of the poems of Fingal and Ossian, were extremely

¹³ Macpherson, *Fingal*, 'A Dissertation concerning the antiquity, etc. of the poems of Ossian the son of Fingal', xvi.

¹⁴ Howard Gaskill, 'Introduction: The Translator's Ossian', *Versions of Ossian: Receptions, Responses, Translations; Translation and Literature* 22/3 (2013), 293–301.

¹⁵ Burney adopted a neutral stance in the Ossian debate itself. In his anonymous review of Joseph Cooper Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (London: T. Payne and Son, 1786), published in the *Monthly Review* 77 (December 1787), 431, he drily noted that Mr Macpherson might have something to say about a 'round assertion' without proof, contained in a letter from Charles O'Connor to Walker (*Historical Memoirs*, 110): 'on such weak foundations ... has Mr. Macpherson erected his gorgeous fabrics of FINGAL and TEMORA'. He also declined to comment on the dispute over national precedence: 'We shall leave the Irish and the Scots to ascertain the existence of Oisín or Ossian, and Fin or Fingal; to authenticate their ancient poetry and scramble for the property', (427–28).

struck with the bold wildness and original ideas of these poems, and when at Hamburg, we mentioned, in the company of the Milton of Germany, Klopstock, the being in possession of the following melodies, which we wrote down for the first time perhaps that they were ever received on paper, he most earnestly intreated us to favour him with transcripts of these airs, which we readily promised to do: but, to our great regret, we were never able to find them till two or three months after his decease. We therefore now give them a place on our plates, not only as curiosities, but to appease the manes of the sublime Klopstock.¹⁶

This version of the meeting confirms the impression conveyed by Burney's letter that Macpherson had been pressed into singing some of his mother's songs by his aristocratic host.¹⁷ Reluctant to perform he may have been, but by agreeing to sing Macpherson became a participant in the very tradition he was mining for material, and his performances of some of her airs constituted the final act of oral transmission from generation to generation; his renditions were the ones finally committed to paper.

In the *Cyclopaedia* account, Burney revealed that he had offered to supply the poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock with copies of his transcriptions. Klopstock was deeply interested in the music to which the Ossian poetry was still being sung, believing, especially in the case of lyric pieces, that it might offer clues to the rhythmic structure of ancient verse.¹⁸ He first contacted Macpherson requesting some examples.¹⁹ Receiving no reply, he then attempted to arrange for a young Dane named Johannes

¹⁶ Charles Burney, addendum to 'Ossian' in Abraham Rees, *Cyclopaedia*, vol. 25 (1819); and 'Plates', vol. 3 (1820), music plate xlv. The plate is entitled 'Original Melodies to the Hymn of Ossian in Temora'.

¹⁷ His apparent unwillingness to perform stands in contrast to other collectors and arrangers of national airs such as Thomas Moore. See Kirsteen McCue, "'An individual flowering on a common stem": melody, performance, and national song', in Philip Connell and Nigel Leask (eds), *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 88–106. Recent studies of Moore include: Sarah McCleave and Triona O'Hanlon (eds), *The Reputations of Thomas Moore: Poetry, Music, and Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); and Sarah McCleave and Triona O'Hanlon, *Project ERIN: Thomas Moore in Europe*, www.erin.qub.ac.uk.

¹⁸ Anna H. Harwell Celenza, 'Efterklange af Ossian: The Reception of James Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* in Denmark's Literature, Art, and Music', *Scandinavian Studies* 70/3 (1998), 359–96: 360: 'To Klopstock the importance of the *Poems of Ossian* did not lie simply in their texts but also in the music which supposedly accompanied them'.

¹⁹ Klopstock alluded to this request in a letter dated 31 June 1769, at which point he was still hoping for material: 'Makpherson, der Retter des Barden Ossian (Ossian war deutscher Abkunft, weil er ein Kaledonier war) wird mir, und wie ich hoffe nun bald, die eisgrauen Melodien zu einigen lyrischen Stellen des grossen Dichters schicken. Mit Hülfe dieser Melodien denk'ich das Sylbenmaass der Barden herauszubringen.' Harwell Celenza, 'Efterklange af Ossian', 369.

Ewald, accompanied by a composer, to travel to the Highlands to collect ‘all the old songs that Macpherson either had left behind or never sought’. After this failed, he approached Angelica Kauffmann with a similar proposal, again to no avail.²⁰ When he met Burney in Hamburg, Klopstock must have hoped that his lengthy search was at an end, but again luck deserted him; back in London, the historian discovered that he had temporarily mislaid his transcriptions.

* * * * *

The songs eventually published in the Rees *Cyclopaedia* in 1820 come from the eloquent conclusion to Book 7 of *Temora* (1763), a second epic poem with which Macpherson was able to cash in on the success of *Fingal*. This small selection includes examples both of narrative and lyric poetry. Macpherson recognized that his method of translation—poetry rendered in the style of prose—had consequences for lyrical set pieces. Given the level of detail in his commentaries, he had remarkably little to say about music. However, he does address this issue:

The whole of this passage, together with the address of Carril to the sun, is a lyric measure, and was, undoubtedly, intended as a relief to the mind, after the long narrative which preceded it. Tho’ the lyric pieces, scattered through the poems of Ossian, are certainly very beautiful in the original, yet they must appear much to disadvantage, stripped of numbers, and the harmony of rhyme. In the recitative or narrative part of the poem, the original is rather a measured sort of prose, than any regular versification; but it has all that variety of cadences, which suit the different ideas, and passions of the speakers.²¹

Thus, although the commentaries sometimes identify lyric interpolations in the narrative, the style of Macpherson’s translation does not change; there is no indication of musical metre, rhyme scheme, or stanza division, and it is therefore not always easy to determine where an inserted ‘song’ begins and ends. He acknowledged that his failure to make this distinction did significant damage to the lyric poetry, but he did not disclose why he felt it necessary for them to appear ‘much to disadvantage’. One obvious (if unpublishable) answer was that he recognized his earlier lack of success with metrical poetry. On 31 October 1758, his verses ‘On the death of Marshal Keith’

²⁰ Harwell Celenza, ‘Efterklange af Ossian’, 361: 3 March 1770: ‘Könnten Sie nicht in Edinburgh, oder auch weiter hinauf gegen Norden, durch Hülfe Ihrer Freunde, einen Musikus aufreiben, der mir die Melodien solcher Stellen im Ossian, die vorzüglich lyrisch sind, in unsre Noten setze?’

²¹ James Macpherson, *The Works of Ossian*, vol. 2 (London: T. Becket and P. A. Dehondt, 1765), 55. He acknowledged the problem a second time: ‘Of all passages in the works of Ossian these lyric pieces lose most, by a literal prose translation, as the beauty of them does not so much depend, on the strength of thought, as on the elegance of expression and harmony of numbers’, 104.

were published in the *Scots Magazine*. The couplets have been described as 'rather wooden and cliché-ridden', and while there is 'a foretaste of the eerie, windy atmosphere of his later work', the 'regular metre detracts from the impression of wildness and strangeness'.²²

In a wider context, lyric set-pieces were useful to Macpherson's project of saga reconstruction, as this kind of free poem would not be tied to the narrative at any one predetermined point. Sinclair saw no reason why songs inserted into the Ossian narratives should not generate their own stories 'subservient to the main action'. Even if there were 'episodical songs' with no direct connection to the subject of the poem, they could still serve the useful purpose of inspiring 'grandeur of mind' and 'sensitivity of heart'.²³ In eighteenth-century opera, aria substitution embodied a similar freedom; the recitative provided the narrative structure into which individual performers were usually at liberty to import showpiece arias of their own choice.²⁴

All sides in the Ossian controversy were at least agreed that the complete epics no longer existed in their original form in any single source; Macpherson had had to reconstruct sequences—or invent them! As he wrote in the 'Dissertation' for *Temora*: 'The story of the poem with which I had long been acquainted, enabled me to reduce the broken members of the piece into the order in which they now appear'.²⁵ The question then arises as to how 'broken' the contributions of the individual sources were and how much stitching he had to do. The material transcribed by Burney from Macpherson's renditions of his mother's songs represents an unbroken sequence at the end of Book 7, and its ordering is as in *Temora*. What constitutes a 'song' is a moot point and Burney's transcriptions could be seen as containing either two or three songs. Burney told Bunting that he had taken down three songs, therefore counting 'Sad and slow' and 'Son of Alpin' as two of them. Anyone with knowledge of Italian opera would have been well used to this numbering problem: the unmeasured

²² Derick S. Thomson, 'Macpherson's *Ossian*: Ballads to Epics', *Béaloideas* 54/55 (1986–1987), 243–64: 248.

²³ Sinclair, *A Dissertation*, cci.

²⁴ When composers were faced with having to incorporate a replacement aria, not necessarily one of their own, it was not difficult to doctor the surrounding recitative on either side to smooth the joins.

²⁵ Macpherson, *Temora*, Dissertation, xviii. The first book of *Temora* had already been published as one of the free poems in *Fingal*, where it was described as an 'epic' poem, very likely with the forthcoming sequel already in mind. Giving further information on the genesis of *Temora*, which typically raised many more questions than it answered, Macpherson explained that the immediate continuation of the narrative in Book 2 had only recently come into his hands. In other words, there really was a pre-existing epic, and Book 2 was the last piece in the jigsaw to be tracked down!

accompagnato introducing the measured aria or *rondò*—an umbilical relationship. In all, the B flat material with which Burney’s transcription begins, includes three units of prose, the units in the published text consisting in size of anything from a full paragraph to a single sentence, but always separated by a space. ‘Sad and slow’ (the recitative) consists of one unit, while ‘Son of Alpin’ (the lyric song, albeit lacking the distinct metrical character of the genre) has two. A second (or third) shorter song consisting of a single unit is in G. There is no obvious way of telling whether Ellen Macpherson herself connected these songs in that order, or indeed whether she connected them at all.²⁶ Their text is that originally published in 1763 rather than the revised version in the collected edition of 1765.²⁷ Sulmalla, in love with Cathmor, has followed him to war, but with battle imminent, he has asked her to take shelter in the Valley of Lona, wherein dwells an ancient Druid Clonmel:

SAD and slow retired Sulmalla to Lona of the streams. She went – and often turned; her blue eyes rolled in tears. But when she came to the rock, that darkly covered Lona’s vale, she looked, from her bursting soul, on the king; and sunk, at once, behind.

SON of Alpin, strike the string. Is there aught of joy in the harp? Pour it then, on the soul of Ossian: it is folded in mist. – I hear thee, O bard, in my night. But cease the lightly-trembling sound. The joy of grief belongs to Ossian, amidst his dark-brown years.

GREEN thorn of the hill of ghosts, that shakest thy head to nightly winds! I hear no sound in thee; is there no spirit’s windy skirt now rustling in thy leaves? Often are the steps of the dead, in the dark-eddying blasts; when the moon, a dun shield, from the east, is rolled along the sky.

ULLIN, Carril and Ryno, voices of the days of old! Let me hear you, while it is yet dark, to please and awake my soul. – I hear you not, ye sons of song; in what hall of the clouds is your rest? Do you touch the shadowy harp, robed with morning mist, where the rustling sun comes forth from his green-headed waves?

It can hardly be a coincidence that this passage, the translation of some of his mother’s songs, was singled out by Macpherson in his commentary for especially high praise: ‘The original of this lyric ode is one of the most beautiful passages of the poem. The harmony and variety of its versification prove, that the knowledge of music was

²⁶ It must be acknowledged that an editor working for Rees could have ordered them after Burney’s death, using the published text.

²⁷ Macpherson, *Temora*, Book 7, 132. Changes in the 1765 edition include: ‘in the darkness of Selma’ to replace ‘while it is yet dark’. This revision demonstrates Macpherson at work, improving the incorporation of his generic material into its specific dramatic location, by identifying Selma, the site of Fingal’s court.

considerably advanced in the days of Ossian'.²⁸ He remained resolutely silent, though, as to where he had obtained these exceptionally good songs. In his 'Dissertation', Macpherson implicitly acknowledged that he had grown up with some of the poems, numbering himself among those who 'chose rather to admire their poet in secret, than see him received, with coldness, in an English dress', adding: 'these were long my own sentiments, and, accordingly, my first translations, from the Galic, were merely accidental'.²⁹ As so often when he tried to proffer an 'explanation', his critics were quick to detect its evasive quality, usually occasioned by a failure to disclose obviously salient facts, or (as here) to elaborate on an ambiguous word such as 'accidental'.

When he eventually decided to answer the growing number of sceptics by making public an original Erse text, Macpherson chose a specimen that ended with some of Ellen's songs. In selecting Book 7 of *Temora*, he was doubtless aware that he would be focusing critical attention on it. If his high praise of his mother's airs was a calculated act of misdirection—turning attention away from awkward questions of narrative structure and onto a richly poetic summation of the essence of Ossian—it proved a brilliantly successful ploy. To make quite certain that interested critics and scholars would focus on what he needed them to focus on, Macpherson incorporated the Erse text of his mother's songs twice: first in the footnote acknowledging their high quality, and then in the complete rendition of Book 7.³⁰ His published explanation for the choice was characteristically vague:

²⁸ William Duff, *Critical Observations on the Writings of the most celebrated Original Geniuses in Poetry* (London: Printed for T. Becket, and P. A. De Hondt, 1770), 121, without mentioning Macpherson, concurred that 'Ullin, Carril and Ryno' was very striking: 'Ossian's address to the deceased bards his predecessors in the end of this book is so poetical, solemn, and strangely fanciful, that the reader will readily excuse my inserting it'.

²⁹ Macpherson, *Temora*, Dissertation, xvii.

³⁰ A slightly later translator of Ossianic poetry, John Smith, *Galic Antiquities: consisting of A History of the Druids, particularly those of Caledonia; A Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian; and A Collection of Ancient Poems, translated from the Galic of Ullin, Ossian, Orran etc.* (Edinburgh & London: T. Cadell & C. Elliot, 1780), 92, was one of many to focus on Book 7 of *Temora*. He was unstinting with his praise: 'the language, as well as the ideas, the kind of verse, the whole texture of the composition, the everything about it, wears such an air of antiquity, and has so venerable, so grand, and so uncommon a cast, that the first critics in the language scruple not to say that a modern could no more compose it, than he could by charms bring down the moon from the heaven'.

ADVERTISEMENT

IT is thought proper to give a specimen of the original Galic, for the satisfaction of those who doubt the authenticity of Ossian's poems. The seventh book of TEMORA is fixed on, for that purpose, not from any other superior merit, than the variety of its versification.³¹

Hugh Blair evidently realized that Macpherson's silence about the character of his oral sources was so complete as to be damaging. For the collected edition of 1765, he provided an appendix which argued strongly in favour of his friend's integrity, and which included an impressive list of informants able to verify his claims. Yet it is striking that most of these witnesses were clerics or antiquarians who could only vouch for having heard performances; the traditional singers and reciters themselves remained out of reach, and contacting them was getting harder, as Klopstock soon discovered. Blair, indeed, describes a tradition in fast decline: 'The fondness of reciting their old poems decays; the custom of teaching them to their children is fallen into desuetude; and few are now to be found, except old men [!], who can rehearse from memory any considerable parts of them'.³² In light of his gendered comments, one wonders whether Blair knew of the significant role played by Ellen.

In marked contrast to Blair, John Smith paid a great deal of attention to music in his 'Dissertation on the Authenticity of Ossian's Poems'. Towards the end of his discussion as to why Ossianic poetry had been able to survive for so long, he lamented the imminence of its extinction:

In a single family only has any of this order [of bards] been retained since the beginning of this century, and the last in that family came down to our times in a very advanced life. His favourite songs are said to have been the poems of Ossian. When age was coming on, memory beginning to fail, and no successor likely to appear, he had so many of them as he most admired committed to writing. By a happy coincidence, Mr Macpherson overtook this bard, and got his treasure'.³³

Smith here hints at the complexity of the transmission process that Macpherson had had to master, as he harvested Ossian materials in the field and prepared them for

³¹ Macpherson, *Temora*, Dissertation, 226.

³² Macpherson, *The Works of Ossian*, vol. 2, appendix, 452.

³³ Smith, *Galic Antiquities*, 126. A footnote identifies this man as 'Macvurieh, bard to Clanronald'. Testimony from John Macpherson of Sleat, dating from November 1763, confirms that Domhnall MacMhuirich was in possession of a manuscript, and that he read from it. Thomson, 'Macpherson's *Ossian*', 247.

publication. Not only was it necessary to translate from one language (Erse) to another (English) but often from one genre (song text) to another (poem).

Descriptions of how this potentially impenetrable cultural interface was handled at the point of collection are rare. An unintentionally comical account is provided by one of the first Ossian tourists. Thomas F. Hill, an English Quaker with no knowledge of Erse, toured the Highlands in 1780 to collect material with which to reach a verdict on Macpherson's integrity.³⁴ He described what it took to acquire a song:

I was afterwards directed to one James Maclaughan, a very old man, much celebrated for his knowledge of ancient songs ... I found him in an old woman's cottage near Blair, entirely willing to gratify my curiosity, and indeed highly flattered that I paid so much attention to his songs: but as he could not talk English, I was obliged to supply myself with another cottager, to translate whilst he sung. The following poem I wrote down from the mouth of our interpreter; a circumstance which naturally accounts for the ruggedness of the language. The good old woman, who sat by spinning, assured me, that, if I had understood the original, it would have drawn tears from my eyes. [Footnote: At the place marked (*) we suspected that our interpreter, weary of his employment, desired old Maclaughan to omit a considerable part of the song and repeat the concluding verse immediately.]³⁵

Hill also described a transcription session with a carpenter who knew 'a number of these songs'. On this occasion, a Mrs Maclean and her son's wife 'were so kind as to sit by and translate for me whilst he repeated and I wrote'.³⁶ In a footnote, he revealed that the younger of his two assistants did more than merely translate, she also offered context: 'Mrs Maclean, jun. to whose elegant abilities and hospitable friendship I was principally indebted for the foregoing song, honoured me with the traditional explication of this verse'.

³⁴ Nigel Leask, *Stepping Westward: Writing the Highland Tour c1720-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 86. Hill submitted examples to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1782 and 1783, before producing a pamphlet: *Antient Erse Poems, collected among the Scottish Highlands, in order to illustrate the Ossian of Mr. Macpherson* (1784).

³⁵ Hill's attempt to collect song texts in a language of which, by his own admission, he understood at best six words, was excoriated by Donald Smith in the *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland*, 130. Smith wondered whether some of Hill's sources were simply having fun at his expense.

³⁶ Hill, *Antient Erse Poems*, 3. Hill continued: 'In order to have some kind of check against deception, I attempted to write down the Erse, together with the translation'. This was a bit rich, considering the duplicity of his own methodology: 'The absurd difficulties I had to encounter with in this pursuit it is not necessary to enumerate: sometimes I was obliged to dissemble a knowledge of Erse, of which I scarcely understood six words; sometimes I was forced to assume the character of a profest author, zealous to defend the honour of Ossian and Mr. Macpherson'.

Fluent in spoken Erse, Macpherson himself could do without the services of a linguistic interpreter, yet he too was engaged in a process of double translation whenever he collected (sung) songs and arranged their texts as (spoken) poems. His English versions of his mother's Erse songs might be regarded as a separate activity, or as an intermediate stage in his wider project, a mechanism for ensuring the retention of a subliminal sense of musicality in the poetry as finally published. His decision to draw a veil over the musical nature of his sources and how he had coped with it, though understandable, added to the aura of deception that clung to his ineffectual responses to the concerns of his critics. He perhaps feared that revealing too much might provide his detractors with ammunition, relating either to the technical details of the collection process, or to the character of the final product. Burney's assessment of Ellen Macpherson's repertoire is telling, as it points to the likely nature of an attack on any song for which Ossian's ultimate authorship was claimed. Although divulged half a century after the event, his memory of a style judgement can probably be relied on. He fully grasped the point that what he was hearing was an orally transmitted anonymous repertoire—he even uses the word 'traditional'.³⁷ On the question of antiquity, his position was that the (melodic) quality variously described as 'wild', 'irregular', or 'unadulterated' was the most reliable pointer to an early date. But whilst admitting that Macpherson's mother's songs resembled the general manner of old Scottish tunes and thus displayed some signs of antiquity, Burney found them to be distinctly 'less wild' than most, and he foresaw no difficulty in providing them with a bass line and even a four-part harmonization. This would not have been a helpful verdict—even for Macpherson's general case—but the suggestion that Ellen's traditional airs, so readily adaptable as parlour songs, might be accepted as evidence that the knowledge of music was 'considerably advanced' in the 3rd century A.D., would have been greeted with derision.³⁸ Therein lay the crux of his problem: preserve the 'numbers' and 'harmony of rhyme', essential to the beauty of lyrical verse, and the

³⁷ Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of Folk Music and Art Music: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 261, discusses the later growth in the use of the word 'traditional' as a generic descriptor.

³⁸ As the project to collect 'national' airs from across the world gained pace, the dichotomy facing transcribers and arrangers became ever clearer: leave the tunes in their original state and risk them remaining folksongs or becoming museum pieces; arrange them for performance in society soirées (to make money) and risk them losing the character they possessed at the point of original collection. For a discussion of how this played out with respect to the 'Hindostannie Air', see Nicholas Cook, 'Encountering the Other, Redefining the Self: Hindostannie Airs, Haydn's Folksong Settings and the "Common Practice" Style', in Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon (eds), *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s-1940s: Portrayal of the East* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 13–38.

musical settings would quickly lose all trace of the 'wildness' and 'irregularity' indicative of antiquity.

This metrical conundrum was discussed by Patrick McDonald in *A Collection of Highland Vocal Airs* (1784).³⁹ Despite the publication date, some of its material had been collected even before Macpherson embarked upon his first research trip to the Western Isles in 1760. Joseph McDonald from Strathnaver in Sutherland had been transcribing airs from the far north, but in the same year that Macpherson arrived in the Highlands and Islands, he decided to accept an appointment with the East India Company. The two very likely never met.⁴⁰ Following Joseph McDonald's death, his brother Patrick obtained the collection and enlarged it considerably with airs from Argyllshire and Perthshire. In the preface to this memorial volume, he noted that Ossian poetry constituted 'a singular phenomenon in the literary world', but he also pointed out that its authenticity had been 'roughly questioned'. His remarks on his brother's system of musical notation (examples of which appear not to have survived) are fascinating. Joseph, he reported, had attempted to adhere faithfully to the singing of the 'natives', even though it was in 'a wild, artless, and irregular manner'.⁴¹ Patrick shed further light on the nature of the irregularity in these transcriptions, working on the assumption that there was an underlying metrical regularity to the airs, but one deformed by singers during the course of committed performance: 'chiefly occupied with the sentiment and expression of the music, they dwell upon the long and pathetic notes, while they hurry over the inferior and connecting notes'. As a result, it was 'exceedingly difficult for a hearer to trace the measure of them'. Joseph had evidently attempted to record what he heard, transcribing individual notes 'according to the proportion of time, that came nearest to those, which were used in singing'. In doing so, he had had to abandon regular bar-lengths. His brother Patrick, however, like most editors of national airs, judged it 'improper, to lay them before the public in that form'.⁴²

³⁹ Patrick McDonald, *A Collection of Highland Vocal Airs. Never hitherto published. To which are added a few of the most lively Country Dances or Reels of the North Highlands & Western Isles* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Publisher, 1784).

⁴⁰ McAulay, *Our Ancient National Airs*, 17.

⁴¹ McDonald, *A Collection of Highland Vocal Airs*, preface, 2.

⁴² Robert Burns, composing original texts for existing tunes, the exact opposite of word setting but no less subtle an art, viewed irregularity as a positive phenomenon, 'a redundancy of syllables with respect to that exactness of accent & measure that the English poetry requires, but which glides in, most melodiously with the respective tunes to which they are set'. McCue, "'An individual flowering on a common stem'", 92.

* * * * *

Burney posted his letter to Bunting several weeks after the draft was written. Bunting replied to express his gratitude:

Belfast, December 28. 1808

Sir

I consider myself highly honored by the obliging and particular Manner in which you were pleased in your Letter of 22^d September last, to answer a former letter with which I had taken the Liberty to trouble you. The injunction it contained, with respect to any use to be made of it, in my collection, of the Ancient Melodies of Ireland, shall be religiously attended to.

It gave me particular pleasure to find that the opinion which I intended to inculcate, respectg the Antiquity of Scottish Music, was not contrary to such deservedly high authority as yours: viz that the Antiquity of that Music is confined to the Music of the Highlands. The ingenious, and satisfactory proof of its antiquity, contained in your Letter (in the Anecdote respectg your Meeting with M^r Macpherson at Lord Eglintons) – has reference merely to the Highland Music, and cannot extend to the Melodies of the Lowlands

You would confer a high favor on me, and on those who shall purchase the Laborious work I am engaged in, did you think it proper to allow me to mention in my intended Treatise on the Harp, that [it] is the Music of the Highlands, to which you attached the claim of Antiquity, in the first Volume of your admirable History, when you say that “The Melody of Scotland will be hereafter proved of a much higher Antiquity than has been generally imagined”

Tho there is no reason to think that Rizzio composed, or improved, the beautiful Lowland airs, which everyone admires; not a doubt can be entertained of their not being of antient Date. When I use the term “antient” I mean a period or periods more remote than the 15th Century, when M^r Tytler in his essay ascribes them to James the first of Scotland, in which opinion however you seem to differ from him.

As the Melodies which M^r Macpherson sung to you were (as you mention) to Erse words, and Erse words could have no Connection with Scotch Lowland Airs; and as the Airs in question form “the foundation of your opinion of the Antiquity of Scotch Tunes”, I am convinced that our convictions are the same on the point.

[comments on the harp]

[comments on the bagpipes]

And to whom should I disclose them [the catalogue of my principal wants] with more freedom than to the first writer on the General History of Music that Great Britain, has, & probably ever will produce – to the Author of one of the ablest works which these Countries boast of on any Subjects.

Craving your pardon for the additional Liberty of this Letter, I am S^r most respectfully y^r ob^t Servant

Edw^d Bunting

You mention that two of the airs to Ossianic Poems, sung to you by M^r Macpherson, have never been published, and that one has. May I ask where the one published, is to be seen; whether the two that have not been published are extant, & whether you mean to make any use of them? I have found

Irish Airs to the same Poems, and Sir John Sinclaire favors me with an Erse one. – both of which I shall probably give in my collection.⁴³

In his first volume of songs, Bunting had included a brief preface, but in the forthcoming second volume he intended to incorporate a substantial treatise, supporting the idea that a clear distinction existed between highland and lowland airs, which latter, he argued, 'want the bewildered strain, the rapid movements and unexpected cadences, the *animi impetus* of minstrels, who considered themselves almost prophetic and inspired'.⁴⁴ He took Burney's account of Macpherson's songs as unambiguous confirmation that highland airs were generally of great antiquity, ignoring the historian's clear reservations as to the nature of Ellen's repertoire.

In his letter to Bunting, Burney had implied that one of the airs he transcribed was already published. (This suggests that he was unaware of Oswald's collection discussed below.) Its identity is uncertain, but one candidate is the short melody entitled 'Ossian's Soliloquy on the Death of all his Cotemporary [sic] Heroes', No.117 in *Highland Vocal Airs*. This tune was one of eight 'ancient' or 'very ancient' airs collected in Argyllshire by Patrick McDonald. Although presented as an instrumental melody, McDonald gave the Soliloquy an Erse title ('Ossian 'an déigh nam Fion') and referred readers to Smith's *Galic Antiquities* for a translation of the text. The reason for suspecting that Burney could have been in contact with McDonald is that he is listed as one of his subscribers: 'Charles Burney, Doctor of Music, 3 copies'. The subscription list itself is remarkable; of over eight hundred names, with addresses stretching from the Highlands to Chichester and Bath, only four individuals signed up from Ireland. Either the contested national ownership of 'Ossian' had become so bitter by then that an Irish boycott was effectively in place, or McDonald did not even attempt to recruit subscribers from across the water. Burney was happy to swap materials with correspondents to enhance his collection of national airs, but there is no direct evidence that he did so in this case. Another possibility, though, is that he recognized this air, independently collected by McDonald, as one of his own. The tune is transcribed in four bars of 9/8 and is lightly ornamented. When William Crotch

⁴³ Edward Bunting, letter to Charles Burney, 28 December 1808. Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Osborn MSS 3, Box 2. Folder 154.

⁴⁴ Bunting, *A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, vol. 2, 5.

republished it in his *Specimens of Music*, he re-barred it to make twelve measures of 3/4.⁴⁵ It cannot be ruled out that this Soliloquy was also in Ellen's repertoire.

When the second volume of his *General Collection* was published in 1809, Bunting avoided taking sides in the ongoing Ossian controversy. There were commercial considerations, though, and his editor's preface is headed by an ostentatious Ossian quotation:

Bards of other times! Ye on whose souls the blue hosts of our fathers rise, strike the Harp in my hall, and let me hear the song. Pleasant is the joy of grief; it is like the shower of spring when it softens the branch of the oak, and the young leaf rears its green head. Raise the song and strike the Harp! Send round the shells of joy. Let some grey bard be near me to tell the deeds of other times, of kings renowned in our land, of chiefs we behold no more. Such was the song of Fingal in the days of his joy; his thousand bards leaned forward from their seats to hear the voice of the king. OSSIAN

This text is a short compilation from three of the free-standing poems in *Fingal: Carric-Thura, Berrathon, and Carthon*. Bunting also alluded briefly to the fact that Irish melodies with Ossianic texts were known and had been collected: 'two celebrated Irish airs, with their ancient variations as practised on the Harp for many years; with these are given an original melody or recitative, which the compiler had the fortune to discover as sung in artless strains in the Highlands of Scotland, and also by the aborigines of different parts of Ireland, to Ossianic Fragments'.⁴⁶

* * * * *

A second source survives with a selection of airs sung by Macpherson: the unique copy of James Oswald's *The Pocket Companion for the Guittar*, held by the Wighton Collection in Dundee Central Library.⁴⁷ Oswald stated: 'The following Airs have been handed down since the time of OSSIAN. The Musick is taken from M^r. M^c.Pherson's

⁴⁵ William Crotch, *Specimens of various styles of music referred to in a course of lectures, read at Oxford and London, and adapted to the Keyed Instruments by W^m Crotch*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for the Author by R^t Birchall, c1808), No. 83.

⁴⁶ Bunting, *A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, vol. 2, preface, ii. In volume 3 (1840), preface, 1, he expressed greater scepticism: '... of all the poems attributed to Ossian, it is now impossible to say whether any, or any part even, be undoubtedly genuine'.

⁴⁷ James Oswald, *The Pocket Companion for the Guittar, containing a favourite collection of the best Italian, French, English and Scots songs, adapted for that instrument and the voice* (London: Printed for and Sold by J^s Oswald, at his Music Shop on the Pavement S^t Martin's Church Yard, n.d.). Catalogue of the Wighton Collection (2 April 2018), 360–61 (No.32001). I am very grateful to Dr Erin Farley for digital copies of the Ossian songs.

singing by Mr. Oswald'. As with so many popular collections of this type, *The Pocket Companion* is undated, but the inclusion of a significant number of airs from Thomas Arne's *Love in a Village*, which was given its première in December 1762, suggests that it was rushed out in 1763, shortly after he gained access to the music of this popular ballad-opera. The transcription session with Macpherson, though, probably took place earlier.⁴⁸ Oswald would first have noted down the melodies as songs and only later added in the instrumental accompaniments, such as they are. The publication of *Temora* in March 1763 offered him another up-to-date selling point for his new guitar collection.

The selection of Ossian songs printed by Oswald is striking in that the source material derives largely from the concluding passages of Book 7 of *Temora*, supplemented by several excerpts from the free poems that follow the end of the saga. The sequence in *The Pocket Companion* is as follows:

No.1	It is Night I am alone	(Songs of Selma)
No.2	On the harp arose the white hand	(Oína-Morul)
No.3	Ullin Carril and Ryno	(Temora, book 7)
No.4	Morning pours from the east	(Temora, book 7)
No.5	Thou dweller between the shields ⁴⁹	(Temora, book 5)
No.6	Son of Alpin strike the string	(Temora, book 7)
No.7	In the Hall I lay in night	(Oína-Morul and Colna-dona)
No.8	Many a King of Heroes and Hero of Iron Shields (Cath-loda)	
No.9	Sad and Slow retired Sulmalla	(Temora, book 7) ⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Both men enjoyed the patronage of the Earl of Bute and could have come into contact that way. John Purser, 'James Macpherson: the Scot who inspired Beethoven and Schubert', *The National* (30 May 2020).

⁴⁹ This excerpt from the start of Book 5 contains the phrase 'Son of Alpin strike the string' from Book 7. There is a rhythmic resemblance between the two settings of the words 'strike the string' but no more.

⁵⁰ At the end of volume 11 of *The Caledonian Pocket Companion*, a major collection of (textless) flute tunes, Oswald also focused on this part of *Temora* but perhaps only for the evocative titles of geographical Ossiana. 'Crona's Vale' (132) comes from *Colna-Dona* ('we returned through Crona's vale'); 'Lona's Vale' (138) comes from Book 7 of *Temora* in the section 'Sad and Slow' ('darkly-covered Lona's Vale'); a third Ossianic title is 'Carril's Lament' (135). It is conceivable that Oswald obtained these tunes from Macpherson as well. The *Caledonian Pocket Companion* series is undated throughout, and it is usually assumed that volumes 11 and 12 were published in the early 1760s.



Illustration 1: 'Sad and slow retired Sulmalla', James Oswald *The Pocket Companion for the Guittar*, (London, n.d.), 142. Wighton Collection in Dundee Central Library. Courtesy of Libraries, Leisure and Culture, Dundee.

Oswald's ordering does not follow that of the published poem. While this may simply reflect his own commercial preferences, it had the effect of splitting the recitative-aria 'pairing' of 'Sad and slow' and 'Son of Alpin', as well as inverting its order. The extent to which Macpherson's ordering followed that of his sources remains a murky area, but a significant one nonetheless, as if he was responsible for shuffling the pieces down to the level of 'Sad and slow' and 'Son of Alpin', then his claim to be reconstructing a lost epic has little credibility, at least in the case of *Temora*.

Oswald's selection may well include further airs sung by Ellen Macpherson, for example, 'Morning pours from the east' (No.4), the text of which immediately precedes the material published in the *Cyclopedia*. Yet there is no reason to exclude the

Irrespective of whether Macpherson was the source, these melodies are different in character. With their regular four-bar phrase structures, they resemble eighteenth-century airs. 'Crona's Vale' modulates freely. While 'Carril's Lament' is pentatonic, its motivic content is tightly arranged. The melody for 'Lona's Vale' does not resemble the setting of these words in Ellen Macpherson's version, but there are echoes with her concluding G major song 'Ullin, Carril and Ryno'.

possibility that other traditional performers provided material. As Macpherson pointed out to Burney, he had never encountered anyone with the skill to make transcriptions from his mother's singing, and presumably that went for other singers he met in Inverness-shire during his childhood and early adolescence. He was not accompanied by a musician on his research trips to the Highlands and Islands.⁵¹ While it is not out of the question that he had a natural facility to memorize airs, it is more likely that these really were tunes of the 'songs my mother taught me' variety, deeply embedded in his memory from his earliest years.

This leads on to a very interesting question: what is the significance of the fact that this relatively small corpus of material relates so exclusively to the end of Book 7 of *Temora* and the free-standing poems following Book 8? One might argue that it was Macpherson's custom to allocate all the material he collected from a productive source to a single section of the narrative under construction. Another possibility, though, is that this concentration simply represents a moment in time: in other words, these happened to be the texts he was working on when he met Burney and Oswald. In any event, Macpherson's dissemination via Oswald of the tunes accompanying the concluding lines of Book 7 of *Temora* is further evidence of his desire to focus attention on his mother's repertoire, albeit without naming her.

Careful study of Macpherson's sources has established that significant parts of his Ossianic poetry stem from balladry.⁵² There are clear links with known stories in the poems published in the *Fragments*, and two years later *Fingal* made 'persuasive and detailed' use of Gaelic ballads. But after Book 1 of *Temora*, which was first published in the *Fingal* volume, they appear to be much less significant. This has been identified as one factor contributing to the 'vagueness of plot and general dullness of execution'

⁵¹ Macpherson's approaches to collecting are discussed in Thomas A. McKean, 'The Fieldwork Legacy of James Macpherson', *Journal of American Folklore* 114 (2001), 447–63. During the first of his trips to the Highland and Islands, he was accompanied by a poet, and throughout he consulted experts in orthography, but although he certainly obtained verbal texts from song collectors, no picture emerges of Macpherson's personal encounters with singers, let alone any attempts by him to collect the tunes themselves. Mackenzie, *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland*, Appendix, 8–9, published a letter, dated 22 October 1763, from Lachlan McPherson who had accompanied him in 1760. It is supportive but makes no mention of music.

⁵² It is interesting that Hill, his lack of Erse notwithstanding, reached this verdict in 1780: *Antient Erse Poems*, 4. Of three plausible alternatives he gave to explain the Ossian phenomenon, he rejected the idea that it was ancient poetry as advertised or that it was wholly a forgery, in favour of a middle way: Macpherson had 'copied from old songs, preserved indeed in the Highlands, but written by unknown bards, and only doubtfully and traditionally ascribed to Ossian'.

that the second epic suffers from.⁵³ In the later stages of compiling *Temora*, perhaps needing additional material quickly, Macpherson appears to have returned to his mother's songs, indubitably representing his earliest experiences of Erse balladry.

* * * * *

The survival of a handful of tunes transcribed twice from Macpherson's singing within a short space of time is a piece of good fortune, but comparing the two versions raises a tricky issue: how to distinguish the possible inadequacy and variability of his performances from any technical shortcomings, or for that matter aesthetic preferences, on the part of the two transcribers? It is necessary first to take account of the instrument for which Oswald arranged accompaniments. Favoured by society ladies, the English guitar had ten strings, two single and four courses (unison pairs), and its tuning was a double triad: C E GG cc ee gg. In his aptly named *A Compleat Tutor for the Guittar*, Oswald offered two scales to enable the beginner to play in the keys of C and G major. As a bonus, subscribers were presented with valuable advice as to what to do in the event of reaching the top fret on the top string: 'Shift y^e Hand'. The 'arrangements' consist of the tunes, each with a chord at the end, although doubtless strumming continued throughout.

The style of Macpherson's Ossian melodies, as transcribed by Oswald, is at once distinctive and curiously unmemorable. Seemingly with very limited if any technical knowledge of music, Macpherson set himself the task of rendering sung Erse poetry into English, still with song in mind. The act of translation itself was certain to generate minor infelicities between existing melody and new language. Of much greater significance, though, was the fact that once a transcriber had selected a time signature, some elements of metrical stress would inevitably be present, even if these had to be imposed on material that was performed with greater rhythmic freedom, as in Patrick McDonald's versions of his brother's tunes. The result is an uneasy compromise; there is nothing unusable about the tunes for the English translations, but the melodic contours and the sporadic sense of a metre often sit uneasily with the text, without ever evoking the much-prized quality of 'wildness'.

That said, there are identifiable traits. There is a fairly high level of agreement between Burney and Oswald as to Macpherson's style of applied ornamentation; he evidently used some two-note ascents from below, but more frequently single grace notes from above or below, often notated as though appoggiaturas. A sense of 'wildness' could certainly have been conveyed through ornamentation, but this is very

⁵³ Thomson, 'Macpherson's *Ossian*', 260–61.

tame stuff.⁵⁴ In 'Son of Alpin', both transcribers inserted dramatic pauses where the text mentions Ossian, suggesting that Macpherson adopted a declamatory approach to the name of his bard. Given that the melodic language, typically for the pentatonic idiom, is a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of similar sounding phrases, Macpherson's memory seems generally good. Only in 'Ullin, Carril and Ryno' is there a serious divergence between the transcribed text of his two performances. He sang the words from 'I hear you not' to different music for the two transcribers, regaining agreement only at 'Ye sons of song'. Variants, of course, are to be expected, but this comes across as a lapse in concentration. An amateur singer might be expected to have trouble pitching at the start of an unaccompanied melody, which perhaps explains a significant melodic variation in the four-note phrase at the start of 'Son of Alpin'; Burney has a rising and falling minor third with the first note reiterated; Oswald has g-a-c-a, starting one note lower. Oswald transposed all his tunes into C to suit the English guitar, notionally far higher than anyone would have sung them, while Burney apparently tried to match Macpherson's approximate level, albeit using a treble clef. In range, songs like 'Morning pours' and 'Ullin, Carril and Ryno' make use of a comfortable octave, but 'It is night' extends to a more challenging octave and a fifth.

⁵⁴ McDonald, *A Collection of Highland Vocal Airs*, preface, 4, discussed vocal ornamentation, but regarded such embellishment as lying in the domain of performers. He felt it necessary to give only a few indicative examples: 'A few appoggiaturas, or grace notes, are occasionally added, in order to give some idea of the style and manner in which the songs are performed'.

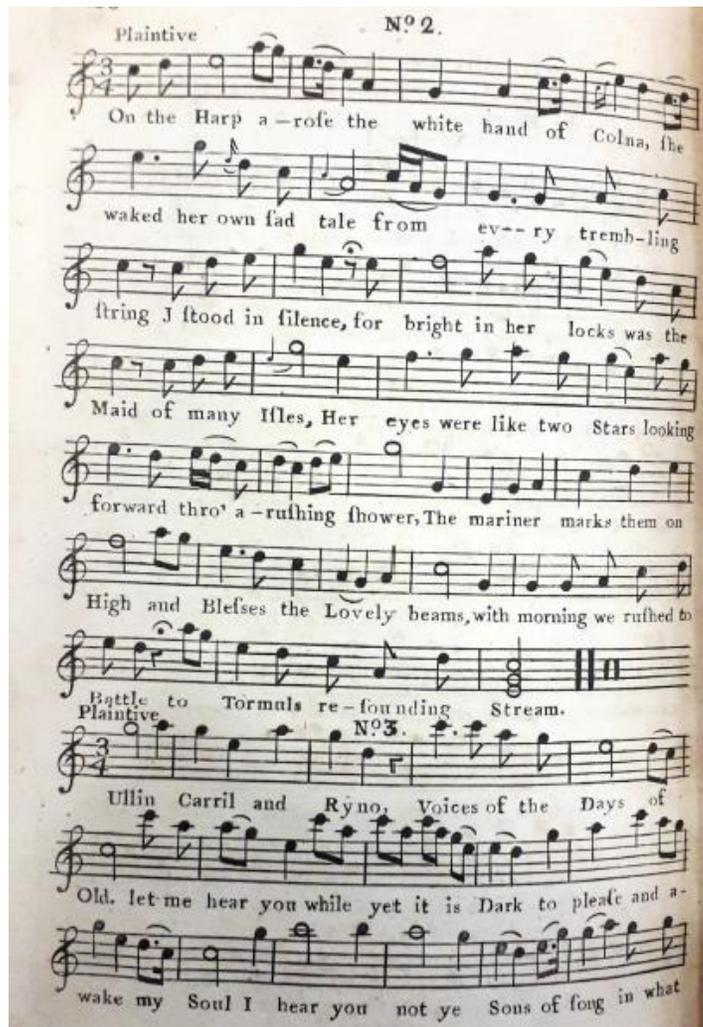


Illustration 2: 'On the harp arose the white hand of Colna', and the start of 'Ullin Carril and Ryno', James Oswald *The Pocket Companion for the Guittar*, (London, n.d.), 136 Wighton Collection in Dundee Central Library. Courtesy of Libraries, Leisure and Culture, Dundee.

By far the most interesting difference between the two transcribers is their attitude to mode. The experienced musician Burney knew that Scottish songs were often pentatonic, and his versions adhere strictly to this five-note pattern, irrespective of how well Macpherson was able to execute it—it is easy to imagine a certain amount of informal correction. A pentatonic scale omits the fourth and seventh degrees of the scale, so that the notes in C major are: c d e g a. In consequence, two melodic approaches to a cadence b-c (to the tonic note) and f-g (to the dominant note) are unavailable, and there is a strong preference for 3-2-1 cadential approaches (easily harmonized in eighteenth-century style) or the 5-6-8 pattern. Most of Oswald's

settings begin with pentatonic writing, but unlike Burney he does not stick to this five-note palette, soon adding in either the fourth or the seventh degree of the scale. (Six-note scales are also common in Scottish music.) Occasionally, as in 'Morning pours', both additional degrees appear to complete a full diatonic scale. The question of course arises as to how much of this was down to Macpherson's singing. The incursion of these new steps on the scale generates many melodic variants, such as the implausibly operatic rising seventh in 'Son of Alpin'. The occasional use of B flat and B natural in proximity to one another might suggest some uncertainty in the pitching of notes by the performer, obliging the transcriber to make a judgement each time. It also represents a significant, if unintended, invitation to any musician harmonising them as parlour songs. The non-pentatonic notes of 'It is night' were treated in just this manner in a version published later in the *Scots Musical Museum*, in which the arranger took advantage of the opportunity afforded by the flattened seventh to modulate into the subdominant.⁵⁵

The full text of the songs transcribed by Oswald was incorporated at various locations in the *Temora* volume as listed above. One song, however, was deployed very differently. There are indications that 'In the Hall I lay in Night' was an English-language ballad. It has well balanced answering phrases, with both textual and musical repetitions. By comparison with the other pieces, it does not come across as a translation; the musical and verbal rhythms match each other better, as do the melodic contours and the sense of the text. There are even examples of word painting: 'swift rolling waves' is appropriately ornamented, and at 'flowed at pleasant sounds', the stream descends a full octave. Although not given by Oswald, and perhaps not disclosed by Macpherson, it has a title: 'The maid of Selma'. An arrangement with a figured bass accompaniment for keyboard was later published in the *Scots Musical Museum*.⁵⁶

The text of this song with its vivid imagery was distributed in two of the independent poems after *Temora* as follows:

⁵⁵ James Johnson, *Scots Musical Museum*, vol. 2 (1788), 123–24.

⁵⁶ Johnson, *Scots Musical Museum*, vol. 2 (1788), 119. 'The Maid of Selma' in this version is identical neither with Burney's nor Oswald's transcription. It ends with a repetition of 'from his green headed waves'.

[Oswald's text; the italics and the two types of underlining identify the distribution of material in Macpherson's poems]

In the Hall I lay in Night, mine eyes were half Closed in sleep, soft Music came to mine Ear, soft Music came to mine Ear, it was the maid of Selma, her breasts were white as the Bosom of a Swan, trembling on swift Rolling Waves, she raised the nightly Song for she Knew that my Soul was a stream that flowed at pleasant Sounds, mixed with the Harp arose her Voice, mixed with the Harp arose her Voice, she came on my troubled Soul like a beam to the Dark heaving ocean when it bursts from a cloud and brightens the foamy Side of a Wave, twas like the memory of joys that are past Pleasant and mournful to the Soul. Pleasant and mournful to the Soul.

Oina-morul (214)

In the hall I lay in night. Mine eyes were half-closed in sleep. Soft music came to mine ear ... she raised the nightly Song for she Knew that my Soul was a stream that flowed at pleasant Sounds.

Colna-dona (222)

she came on his soul, like a beam to the dark-heaving ocean: when it burst from a cloud, and brightens the foamy side of a wave #

Here an episode is intirely lost; or, at least, is handed down so imperfectly, that it does not deserve a place in the poem.

Colna-dona (223)

Fair behind it rose the breasts of a maid, white as the bosom of a swan, trembling on swift-rolling waves.

If this was a song with an English text, it might account for the way Macpherson mined it for material. Had the text of the piece been identified, he would have had to admit that no translation was involved! The distribution of fragments of material in four locations in two poems (and out of order) helped to conceal the use of a common source. The direct incorporation of the song title 'Maid of Selma' (assuming it had already acquired it) might well have given the game away, and Macpherson instead chose to identify the woman in Miltonian style as 'the maid of Fuärfed wild'. The footnote is bogus if it refers to the loss of the lines that conclude Oswald's transcription of Macpherson's performance: 'twas like the memory of joys that are past, pleasant and mournful to the soul'. This was perhaps just too twee for a third-century bard. Its omission probably had nothing to do with lost or corrupted Erse texts.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Another of Oswald's songs appeared later with a title. 'It is night' was published as 'Song of Selma' in Johnson, *Scots Musical Museum*, vol. 2 (1788), 123–24. In this case, however, the title derives from Macpherson's *The Songs of Selma*, a free poem following the first epic *Fingal*. To the extent that this title represents not just the songs sung in the poem itself but the whole concept of the place of song

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Macpherson's calculated decision to praise his mother's 'lyric ode' at the end of Book 7 of *Temora* as one of the 'most beautiful' passages of the poem did not pass unnoticed in Germany. Both Goethe and Herder engaged directly with her material, unaware (presumably) of its ultimate source. In addition to quoting extensively from *The Songs of Selma* and *Berrathon* in *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*, Goethe purchased dictionaries and attempted to translate fragments of the Gaelic specimen provided by Macpherson. In a letter to Herder in September 1771, he enclosed renditions of seven fragments.⁵⁸ The first three are taken from Ellen's ode: 'Son of Alpin' ('Rühr Saite du Sohn Alpins des G'sangs'); 'Ullin, Carril and Ryno' ('Ullin und Carril und Raono'); and 'I hear you not' ('Nicht hör'ch euch Söhne des G'sangs'). Herder was also greatly impressed with this passage and included the whole ode in the second volume of his *Volkslieder* under the title 'Erinnerung des Gesangs der Vorzeit' (memory of the song of old).⁵⁹

in third-century society, its use again for 'Ullin, Carril and Ryno' (from Book 7 of *Temora*) is not surprising. James Johnson, *Scots Musical Museum*, vol. 3 (1790), 265. Considering the huge impact of the Ossian poems themselves and their profound influence on later composers, the airs themselves made little real impact on eighteenth-century published collections. See, Porter, *Beyond Fingal's Cave*, 18–26. John Bowie, *A Collection of Strathspey Reels & Country Dances* (Edinburgh: Printed and sold for the Author by N. Stewart & Co., 1789), 32, included three harp airs, said to be 'by' Fingal. A note identifies them as pieces of 'ancient' music, which in the late-eighteenth century often implied music from the time of Purcell and Handel. They bear little resemblance in style to the airs published by Oswald.

⁵⁸ Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh, 'Goethe's Translation from the Gaelic *Ossian*', in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 156–75; Howard Gaskill, 'Arise, O magnificent effulgence of Ossian's soul: Werther the Translator in English Translation', *Versions of Ossian: Receptions, Responses, Translations; Translation and Literature* 22/3 (2013), 302–21.

⁵⁹ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Volkslieder*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: in der Weygandschen Buchhandlung, 1779), 138–39. Erinnerung des Gesanges der Vorzeit, / Aus Ossian. / Rühr Saite, du Sohn Alpins des Gesangs, / Wohnt Trost in deiner Harfe der Lüfte? / Geuß über Ossian, den Traurigen, sie, / Dem Nebel einhüllen die Seele. / Ich hör' dich Bard' in meiner Nacht, / Halt an die Saite, die zitternde, / Der Wehmuth Freude gebühret Ossian, / In seinen braunen Jahren. / Gründorn, auf dem Hügel der Geister, / Webend das Haupt in Stimmen der Nacht, / Ich spüre ja deinen Laut nicht, / Geistergewand nicht rauschend im Laube dir. / Oft sind die Tritte der Todten, / Auf Lüftchen im kreisenden Sturm. / Wenn schwimmt von Osten der Mond, / Ein blasser Schild, ziehend den Himmel hindurch. / Ullin und Carril und Raono, / Vergangne Stimmen der Tage vor Alters, / Hör' ich Euch im Dunkel von Selma; / Es erhebe die Seele des Lieds. / Nicht hör' ich euch, Söhne des Gesangs, / In welcher Wohnung der Wolken ist eure Ruh? / Rührt ihr die Harfe, die düstre, / Gehüllt in Morgengrau, / Wo aufsteigt tönend die Sonne, / Von Wellen, die Häupter blau? See Johann Gottfried Herder and Philip V. Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

The first decade of the nineteenth century saw a renewed and vigorous debate over the authenticity of the *Ossian* poems. The Erse text of Book 7 of *Temora* remained the subject of especially intense scrutiny. The report published by the Highland Committee of Scotland concluded that Macpherson had published *Temora* too hastily to cash in on the success of *Fingal*:

The committee thinks it discovers some difference between the style both of the original (one book of which is given by Macpherson) and translation of *Temora*, and that of the translation of *Fingal*, and of the small portion of the original of that poem, which it received from his executors. There is more the appearance of simplicity and originality in the latter than in the former ... Whoever will examine the original prefixed to some of the editions of the 7th book of *Temora*, and compare it with the translation, will, in the opinion of the Committee, discover some imperfections, some *modernisms*, (if the expression may be allowed) in the Gaelic, which do not occur in the specimen of *Fingal*, given in the Appendix to this Report; and in the English, more of a loose and inflated expression (which however was an error into which Macpherson was apt to fall), than is to be found in his earlier translations.⁶⁰

The Committee broadly absolved Macpherson from the charge of outright fraud, whilst allowing other telling criticisms to stand. Malcolm Laing was less charitable, arguing that Macpherson's English poetry was his own work, and that, when pressed by critics, he had translated it 'back' into Erse. He was one of those who identified 'modernisms' in Book 7 of *Temora*, pointing out that the image of the 'trembling' string, used by Macpherson in his translation of 'Son of Alpin', was a commonplace in the poetry of Dryden, Pope and Gray.⁶¹ As for the claimed antiquity of this original, he was scathing: 'But the efforts to translate these expressions into Erse of the third century, are alone sufficient to discredit the pretended originals'. This was saying of the poetry of Ellen's airs what Burney had implied of their music. Patrick Graham, a defender of Macpherson, focused on Book 7 of *Temora*, which he found 'beautiful, elegant, and dignified throughout'.⁶² His approach was to demonstrate that Macpherson had often misunderstood his sources, and that he had insufficient command of the language to have translated his English poems into Erse. To rebut Laing's charge, Graham made a new English version from the original Erse of Book 7, specifically for the purpose of teasing out Macpherson's inadequacies; by demonstrating his incompetence, he would be able to affirm his integrity.

⁶⁰ Mackenzie, *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society*, 153–54.

⁶¹ Malcolm Laing (ed.), *Poems of Ossian*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1805), 220–21.

⁶² Patrick Graham, *An Essay in the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian; in which the Objections of Malcolm Laing, Esq. are particularly considered and refuted* (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1807), 279.

Commenting on line 403 of *Temora*, the start of Ellen Macpherson's Erse original of 'Son of Alpin', Graham wrote: 'Mr Macpherson's translation of this verse is probably intended to be very fine; and is, perhaps, very fine: but the finery is not Ossian's'. Where Laing had argued that 'the joy of grief' was too refined for the period of Ossian, Graham countered that it was practically nonsensical: 'might we not as well say "the whiteness of blackness?"'⁶³

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In constructing his epics, Macpherson showed an awareness of the centrality of music in the third-century culture he was aiming to depict. It was usually conceded that, as Ossian's mouthpiece, he had risen to this part of his task quite effectively. Blair waxed lyrical in his study: 'The Musick of bards, a favourite object with Ossian, is illustrated by a variety of the most beautiful appearances that are to be found in nature. It is compared to the calm shower of spring; to the dews of the morning on the hill of roes; to the face of the blue and still lake'.⁶⁴ By comparison with Smith, however, his musical soundscape was austere. The misty vales and mountains of third-century Caledonia, as depicted in the translations in *Galic Antiquities*, were alive with the sounds of singing and strummed harps!

Macpherson also recognized that music or musical declamation had been central to the transmission of this culture's stories from the start. As Blair put it, before writing was invented, only poetry, musically delivered ('pronounced with a musical modulation or tone'), could take hold sufficiently of the imagination and memory to enable an oral tradition to develop.⁶⁵ In his extended historical introduction to *Fingal*, Macpherson developed this line of argument:

Their poetical compositions were admirably contrived for that purpose. They were adapted to music; and the most perfect harmony 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.⁶⁶

⁶³ Graham, *An Essay in the Authenticity*, 374–75.

⁶⁴ Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian: the Son of Fingal* (London: T. Becket and P. A. de Hondt, 1763), 62.

⁶⁵ Blair, *A Critical Dissertation*, 3.

⁶⁶ Macpherson, *Fingal*, 'A Dissertation concerning the antiquity, etc. of the poems of Ossian the son of Fingal', fol. b2^v.

He subscribed to the widely held view that the Irish language was uniquely well adapted to this purpose: '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'.⁶⁷

Macpherson's problem with music was a contemporary one: how to account for the performance traditions of his own day, namely the way in which poetry for which he was claiming an unbroken oral tradition of fifteen hundred years was being sung. His reluctance to acknowledge the musical character of some of his sources suggests that he sensed a mismatch between the rather nondescript style of eighteenth-century song and the grandeur of the epics he was engaged in (re-)constructing. He seems to have concluded at quite an early stage that, if he could get away with it, it would be politic to say nothing at all about the music of his oral sources. Joseph McDonald's departure to India fortuitously allowed him to get away with this. Had his rival collector's work been published in the early 1760s, Macpherson would undoubtedly have had to face questions about the metrical characteristics of the oral tradition he was recording, to say nothing of dubious claims for the 'high' antiquity of its style.

Thanks to Burney's recollection of his encounter with Macpherson, we can be confident that Ellen provided her son with song texts which he incorporated in *Temora*. In the final stages of his Ossian project, he paid tribute to the beauty of what he had learnt from his mother's singing, and he signalled very clearly, through his double citation of her Erse, that he was confident that her texts would survive close examination. Herder, picking up on these hints or else independently recognising the quality of Ellen's songs, chose the full text of her 'lyric ode' for his *Volkslieder* ensuring that it would be read across Europe. But even though the influence of maternal performance was generally a matter of pride for collectors and performers of traditional song, Macpherson, so far as is known, stuck by his decision not to acknowledge his mother's contribution.⁶⁸

Ian Woodfield

Queen's University Belfast

⁶⁷ As note 66.

⁶⁸ McCue, "'An individual flowering on a common stem'", 93, suggests that maternal performance constitutes 'an important affective link between mother and song and the origins of national identity'.