THOMAS M. CURLEY

Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland

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James Macpherson's famous hoax, publishing his own poems as the writings of the ancient Scots bard Ossian in the 1760s, remains fascinating to scholars as the most successful literary fraud in history. This study presents the fullest investigation of his deception to date, by looking at the controversy from the point of view of Samuel Johnson. Johnson's dispute with Macpherson was an argument with wide implications not only for literature, but for the emerging national identities of the British nations during the Celtic Revival. Thomas M. Curley offers a wealth of genuinely new information, detailing as never before Johnson's involvement in the *Ossian* controversy, his insistence on truth-telling, and his interaction with others in the debate. The appendix reproduces a rare pamphlet against *Ossian* written with the assistance of Johnson himself. This book will be an important addition to knowledge about both the *Ossian* controversy and Samuel Johnson.

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To Ann
Once again and always

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Prefatory acknowledgments

The original impetus for this study of the Celtic Revival in the age of Johnson occurred during my years as a doctoral candidate under Walter Jackson Bate at Harvard University. John Kelleher, then dean of Irish Studies in the United States, urged me to probe Samuel Johnson's ties to Irish intellectuals involved in the controversy over James Macpherson's fraudulent Scottish Gaelic poetry (1760–3) attributed to the legendary bard, Ossian. I carefully stored the suggestion in my memory for possible use in the future. In the meantime my curiosity turned to other Johnsonian matters of travel, empire, law, and politics. My graduate-school interest in Macpherson did bear some early fruit at Columbia University, where I finally tracked down a copy of William Shaw's rare anti-*Ossian* pamphlet, published in 1782 with Johnson's little-known assistance. In 1987 I spoke about their collaboration at conferences sponsored by the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh and contributed an essay to *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment* (Aberdeen University Press, 1987), edited by Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock. Having published on *Ossian*, I redirected my energies into two decades of scholarship focused on preparing the first biography of Johnson's friend, Sir Robert Chambers, and the first edition of Chambers's Vinerian Law Lectures, which Johnson helped to compose.

When I turned to completing this book, I was surprised to find that my essay on the *Ossian* controversy had provoked my own mini-controversy, with revisionist scholars bent on rehabilitating Macpherson's reputation. This development lent urgency to a project of long choosing and beginning late. It required me to undertake a comprehensive survey of *Ossian* scholarship and a painstaking evaluation of the entire *Ossian* canon, comparing it with genuine Gaelic poetry, in consultation with Gaelic specialists, like Micheal Mac Craith, for the fullest elucidation of the literary deception to date. Without such an assessment discussion of Johnson's personal investment in the contest would have diminished

value and meaning for readers. Only close analysis of Macpherson's creative process could properly clarify the strengths and weaknesses of Johnson's stance against *Ossian*.

Johnson purportedly stated that "A man will turn over half a library to make one book." My obligations extend to several libraries at home and abroad and to many archivists and scholars who helped me to make this book possible. I happily note the learned intervention of my son, Jon R. Curley, in proofreading my manuscript. I am proud to mention the unfailing assistance of fellow Johnsonians, John L. Abbott, John J. Burke, Jr., the late Donald J. Greene, the late J. D. Fleeman, and the late Paul J. Korshin. My friends, Paul Hamill, Nollaig O'Muraile, and James Reibman, and my colleagues, Charles C. Nickerson, Evelyn Pezzulich, and Louis and Cynthia Ricciardi, all lent their faithful support at almost every stage of this project's unfolding. Among Scottish Enlightenment specialists, Richard Sher taught me to proceed with caution in examining personalities associated with the *Ossian* controversy and furnished me with invaluable documentary evidence of Johnson's patronage of William Shaw. George Mc Elroy made me privy to his unpublished survey of Macpherson's political propaganda and his unpublished stylometric analysis of Shaw's writing for internal evidence of Johnson's contributions. Thomas Kaminski sponsored my presentation of a paper on Johnson and the Irish at a splendid 2003 meeting of the Johnson Society of the Central Region located at Notre Dame University. Then too in 2005 Lance Wilcox kindly oversaw a reading of my paper on *Ossian* at the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies.

Before the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Boston in 2004, I spoke about the need for reassessing recent scholarship exaggerating *Ossian*'s reputed authenticity. That experience led to an invitation to engage in an essay debate for volume 17 (2006) of *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*. The result was a monograph-length article, "Samuel Johnson and Truth: The First Systematic Detection of Literary Deception in James Macpherson's *Ossian*," a study which constitutes the intellectual blueprint of this book. I am particularly grateful to Jack Lynch, editor of *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, for publishing my essay and for permission to reproduce material in chapters 5 through 7 below taken from two other articles in volumes 12 (2001) and 18 (2007) of this journal.

I am profoundly thankful for generous funding of my scholarship in England, Ireland, and Scotland from the Center for the Advancement of Research and Teaching at Bridgewater State College, from an Irish-American

Research Fellowship of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in 2001, and from the National Endowment for Humanities under a Summer Stipend in 1999 and a Fellowship for College Teachers in 2000. I consider myself especially indebted to the president of Bridgewater State College, Dana Mohler-Faria, for conferring on me in 2005 the signal honor of a presidential fellowship, freeing me from a year's teaching duties for final preparation of this book.

Nobody can write a book of scholarship without acknowledging the indispensable aid of all those keepers of archives who guide research, suggest possibilities, and uncover solutions. Therefore, I am very beholden to the gracious staffs of the Houghton and Widener Libraries at Harvard University, the British Library, the National Libraries of Scotland and Ireland, the Signet Library and the General Register House at Edinburgh, the Pearse Street Public Library at Dublin, and the Linen Hall Library and Science Library of Queen's College in Belfast. Siobahn O'Rafferty unlocked the treasures of the Royal Irish Academy, and Stephen Parks directed me to the rich offerings of the Beinecke Library of Yale University. I was supremely served, year after year, at the Maxwell Library of Bridgewater State College by Marcia Dineen, Pamela Hayes-Bohanan, Cynthia J. W. Svoboda, and, above all, Mary Ellen West, who steadfastly made available myriad texts, and Dennis Moser, who created a computerized reproduction of the rare pamphlet in my appendix. To my indexer, Sylvia B. Larson, and my copy editor, Hilary Scannell, I extend my very deep gratitude.

My greatest debt must begin and end at home. To my beloved wife, Ann, who always tells the truth, I dedicate this book on Johnson's love of truth in life and literature.

CHAPTER I

An introductory survey of scholarship on Ossian*: why literary truth matters*

> Ossian sublimest, simplest bard of all,
> Let English infidels M'Pherson call.
> Charles Churchill, *A Prophecy of Famine* (1763)

Concerning Samuel Johnson, a very close friend affirmed that "no man had a more scrupulous regard for truth; from which, I verily believe, he would not have deviated to save his life."[1] No writer angered Johnson more than did James Macpherson for perpetrating what arguably became the most successful literary falsehood in modern history. With the monumental exception of his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81), Johnson's most notable literary undertaking in old age after his edition of Shakespeare (1765) involved debunking Macpherson's bogus poetry. Exposing Macpherson's fabricating ways was a fitting activity for an author ranked as England's greatest moralist. This book, therefore, is fundamentally a study about Johnson and *Ossian*, Johnson's interest in Gaelic culture and linguistics, and his involvement in a controversy smoldering throughout the British Isles for almost the final quarter-century of his life. The present chapter briefly reviews the enormous amount of scholarship published about Macpherson since 1800. The subsequent focus of attention lies on much of the pre-1800 critical response by Scottish, English, and Irish participants in a Celtic Revival, which unleashed national cultural wars over historical origins and political precedence for an ethnically mixed people. The contest over the authenticity of Macpherson's pseudo-Gaelic productions became a seismograph of the fragile unity within restive diversity of imperial Great Britain in the age of Johnson.

Although the mass of scholarship about the controversy might appear exhaustive (this writer, decades ago, naively thought the whole question resolved beyond further dispute), recent developments have warranted renewed inquiry. In particular, a current generation's worth of revisionist studies requires the revisiting of some of their leading claims and

counterclaims from a Johnsonian point of view. To their credit, these scholars offer a salutary reminder that the many varieties of fakery and literary fraud should resist being subjected reductively to a simple judgmental system of right and wrong. The boundaries of truth, falsehood, and literary fiction can be devilishly difficult to separate, and even though we may think we know deception when it occurs, it can be difficult to define and demonstrate why it is a culpable act. Nonetheless, while standards of right and wrong can be seen as contingent norms, they are not – and were not – meaningless norms. Johnson, like most of his compatriots, cared deeply about deception.

A great deal of new and important information is marshaled here to show that Johnson was the arch-enemy of falsehood in the *Ossian* business, not only for offending against morality but also for violating authentic history and the simple human trust that makes society possible. Chapter 2 sets forth the most thorough examination of the overall spuriousness of *Ossian* to date in order to provide readers with the necessary background for evaluating in later chapters the attitudes and arguments of supporters and antagonists of Macpherson in the British Isles during the last half of the eighteenth century. Chapter 3 probes Johnson's omnipresent demand for truth in life and literature and then examines his fascinating interaction with Grub Street frauds and farsighted advocates of British antiquities like Thomas Percy. Chapter 4 sheds much new light on *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, a classic of travel literature, responsible for reigniting the *Ossian* controversy and instigating Macpherson's legendary, yet half-understood demand for satisfaction bordering on a challenge to a duel with Johnson. Chapters 5 and 6 comprise a groundbreaking investigation of Johnson's Irish connections to the Celtic Revival and to opponents of *Ossian* – patriots like Charles O'Conor and Thomas Campbell who embodied the complexities of national identity during Ireland's first modern stirrings for independence. Chapter 7 uncovers Johnson's last word on *Ossian*, as enunciated by his forgotten friend, the Scottish-Gaelic linguist, William Shaw, Macpherson's foremost adversary near the end of the century. Finally, an appendix contains an annotated transcription of Shaw's rare *Reply to Mr. Clark* (1782), polished carefully by Johnson on the eve of its publication.

Macpherson claimed to have published literal prose translations of Gaelic poems by an ancient Gaelic bard called Ossian supposedly from the third century, although Macpherson sometimes equivocated about the dating of the canon. In fact, Macpherson invented most of the *Ossian* canon himself, even though he did occasionally draw on oral and

manuscript sources of extant Gaelic ballads. *Ossian* was neither ancient nor authentic, but it made an indelible impression on many Romantic and modern authors. Surprisingly, a number of recent scholars intent on rehabilitating Macpherson's reputation have miscalculated, or opted to sidestep, the crucial issue of the authenticity of his publications. No one wants to obstruct the valuable reassessment of *Ossian* in progress. Although by the twentieth century it had become something of a curiosity rather than staple literary fare of university lecture halls, there are modern critics who understandably find the work worthwhile reading as an aesthetic object amenable to complex literary and cultural analysis. It certainly generated an important episode in the history of taste. But if any scholars wish to ensure a judicious investigation of those qualities within its make-up that affected later Western literature to the delight of so many readers, they should proceed with a clear perspective on the nature of its creation. As to why the nagging question of Macpherson's falsehood refuses to go away, Johnson would have answered that truth in literature and life is a perennial human concern inextricably tied to the survival and fulfillment of the race.

In any case, the controversy over *Ossian* has never really died, notwithstanding the passage of two and a half centuries. Even when we exclude editions of *Ossian* and omit doctoral dissertations about it, an admittedly unscientific enumeration of writings on the matter reveals a very significant output of publications. Since 1800 there have appeared in English about 135 books and 150 articles touching on Macpherson, wholly or in part, directly or indirectly. Determining the overall number and partisanship of these works can be a tricky business, because few of them are unambiguously hostile or enthusiastic. However, a dutiful survey of these materials leaves the distinct impression that approximately as many books but roughly twice as many articles have come out in support of *Ossian* for its aesthetic value or historical significance.[2] This critical ascendancy becomes especially noticeable since the 1980s when revisionist scholars, sympathetic to Macpherson, spearheaded a serious assessment of his canon in at least two biographies, three collections of essays, an excellent modern edition of *Ossian* in 1996, a four-volume printing of all first editions in 2004 (including early critical and creative writing inspired by the controversy), and several other articles and monographs offering significant new commentary.

All this useful scholarship has helped to elucidate *Ossian*'s aesthetic character and importance for Romantic and modern literature in Europe and America, without usually giving sustained attention to the matter of

its genuineness. Instead, either a lack of interest in the issue or, more often, vague and unexamined assumptions about indebtedness to Gaelic sources can compromise otherwise worthwhile critical probing. Some modern enthusiasts of *Ossian* prefer an ahistorical perspective on the controversy. They downplay the historical issue of authenticity, sometimes to shield Macpherson from negative criticism, even as they resort to the historical argument of his immense influence on later writers as evidence of *Ossian*'s enduring value. A discrepancy surfaces: they sidestep historical considerations surrounding the work's controversial creation and yet focus on historical considerations surrounding its undeniable literary impact in the West. For them authenticity either is not a crucial matter or is brushed aside as something already established in no need of further evaluation. Moreover, some of them argue that art has priority over literary history (as if literary concerns can be divorced from authorial context, even though worth and authenticity are not inseparable), that literary forgery verges on legitimate fiction (a conflation potentially degrading to the dignity of literature) because both are make-believe rather than factual (if the two are difficult to distinguish, fiction's "lies" are not real lies since they do not ask to be accepted as "true" in a definitive historical sense), and that truth is relative or conditional or undiscernible anyway (in fundamental opposition to Johnson's convictions).

A mere glance at previous studies touching on the authenticity issue can uncover a surprising degree of inconsistency and uncertainty about Macpherson's creative process. Even Derick Thomson's indispensably authoritative *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'* (1952) has led to some misunderstanding. He summed up the scholarly accomplishment of the above monograph in a later essay, "Macpherson's *Ossian*: Ballads to Epics" (1987): "That *part* of Macpherson's work that rested securely on genuine Gaelic ballads has been elucidated in a fairly definitive way."[3] He took justifiable pride in discovering most of the Gaelic sources influencing not every work of *Ossian* but, strictly speaking, only a *portion* of the canon. Contrary to what some readers have surmised, he did not state that all or most of *Ossian* was Gaelic based or qualified in any sustained, substantial way as translation, paraphrase, or even creative adaptation. Most recently he has argued, in "James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension," in *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (1998), that Macpherson's sixteen or so sources played "a somewhat subsidiary role" in his creative process.[4] In the final analysis, Thomson devoted himself to identifying the actually few similarities between *Ossian* and Gaelic tales in the relatively small "part" of the canon where sources

could be pinpointed convincingly, from words and phrases to occasional episodes and, rarer still, general narrative blueprints. He inferred that Macpherson "was not a mere forger," and yet that "although much has been found in common between Macpherson's work and the ballads, *essentially they are profoundly different*" (*Gaelic Sources*, 75 and 83; emphasis added).

This careful finding of a profound difference between Gaelic tradition and literary invention has received less acknowledgment than it deserves. Such is the case with Joseph Bysveen and Paul J. DeGategno, who suppose that the debate has long since been settled in, respectively, *Epic Tradition and Innovation in Macpherson's Fingal*, and *James Macpherson*.[5] However, despite the conclusions of Thomson and DeGategno, Howard Gaskill disagrees that the authenticity issue has any certain determination, even though it now seems "reasonably clear" that the "deception" ranged from occasional translation and adaptation to complete fabrication, according to his introduction to *Ossian Revisited* (1991).[6] A critic like Dafydd Moore weighs in with yet another opinion, namely, that authenticity has been sufficiently established generally in Macpherson's favor (not true). He goes further and deems the matter a distraction impeding *Ossian*'s acceptance in his otherwise astute *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian*.[7] Again, Moore disagrees with well-taken scholarly curiosity about *Ossian*'s genuineness in "The Critical Response to Ossian's Romantic Bequest" (2003).[8] Moore's disapproval of our entertaining concerns about literary authenticity appears in the passage below, with corrective queries about his objections inserted in brackets:

> We might even feel that the obsession with the issue demonstrates a singular failure to understand the nature of literary or artistic appreciation [is not Macpherson's creative process crucial to an "appreciation" of his achievement and artistry?], or indeed literature or art itself [is not *Ossian*'s creation relevant to current critiques of fiction and forgery?], but then this is the beauty of the tactic, since, if *Ossian* is a fraud, if it is not "real", then it is not literature or art [it *is* literature and art fraudulently publicized as literal translation rather than mainly authorial invention; its ambiguous status results in ambiguous value judgments], and so it can be treated without reference to the standards of the discipline [has not the controversy always concerned standards of literary study?].

Obviously the authenticity issue has refused to go away, and rightly so. According to that leading authority, Howard Gaskill, the "relationship of *Ossian* to authentic Highland tradition . . . is either ignored or underplayed."[9] Disputants on both sides of the controversy have at times

neglected the matter, but the party most responsible for ignoring or for overplaying *Ossian*'s Gaelic roots for almost the past half-century has been a group of scholars intent on reviving interest in Macpherson by minimizing embarrassing, if vital, questions of intellectual concern. Some scholars come close to denying that fabrication occurred, on the shaky grounds that the mostly made-up work of *Ossian* was not totally make-believe because of its occasional reliance on sixteen or so Gaelic sources. To palliate Macpherson's conduct, they imply negligible deception by virtue of his use of some Gaelic antecedents, however slight and fitful their actual influence on his canon. Hence, they contend erroneously that "much" or "many" of the work(s) "in large part" "drew heavily on existing poetic traditions" to such "a considerable degree" or with such "an almost total indebtedness" to Gaelic sources that Macpherson "is not, in general, making things up."[10] In accordance with this misreading of the episode, Macpherson qualifies as a "creative editor/translator" engaged in an "act of creative reconstruction" productive of "a blend of Highland tradition and Macpherson's imagination" or "a collage of more or less genuine translations" or "a synthesis of Gaelic poems" or "a pastiche of genuine Gaelic myth cycles" which "creatively adapted the rich Gaelic ballad tradition of the Highlands."[11] This mistaken faith in a core genuineness in *Ossian* has within a quarter-century practically become a critical conviction eliding the boundary between literary truth and falsehood in analyses of Romantic identity:

> James Macpherson, an upwardly-mobile young Scot hoping to make his name in literary London, pieced together assorted Scottish tales and ballads, arranged them into classical epic form, and attributed them to the bard Ossian who may have lived three hundred, but certainly not one thousand, years earlier.[12]

Wishful thinking obscures the actuality of large-scale authorial invention and causes the works of *Ossian* to be designated variously as "a paraphrase of genuine orally transmitted Fenian lore" or as "imitations of a sort, but that term does not do justice to Mac Pherson's inspired transformation of his sources" or as "creative translations" or, most strangely of all, as "a translation without an original."[13] On this slippery slope of evasive terminology, the favored classification by Macpherson scholars is his own preferred description of his deception as a "translation" – about the least applicable word available to capture and convey his original literary artistry. The use of the term "a translation," like all the others previously noted, is thoroughly misleading. How can either a lay reader or a general scholar come to grips with the underlying realities of the controversy or of

the canon under the impress of such obfuscation and vagueness? Taking no chances, one puzzled commentator on modern Scottish literature finds no other way out of the confusion than to flirt with contradiction and refer to Macpherson as "the compiler and/or fabricator of the epics *Fingal* . . . and *Temora*."[14] We can best serve truth about the fabricated core of *Ossian*, and best honor its creator, simply by calling Macpherson a writer of mostly original literature. In doing so, we appease both critical camps by recognizing a great deal of invention disguised as translation and by affirming creative authorship, so appealing to the Romantics, in much of its production. Candor about his falsehood yields clarity about his achievement.

More accuracy and precision in future scholarship are absolutely necessary for a number of reasons. First, a fuller understanding of the actual make-up of *Ossian* would go hand in hand with any consideration of its relevance to Celtic, Scottish, and British identity issues since the advent of devolution. How much of an actual Gaelic dimension resides in the canon? What is ethnically traditional and what uniquely Macphersonian about its content to make it conducive or resistant to engendering valid or invalid, helpful or hurtful, stereotypes about the people of Scotland within and apart from the United Kingdom? Second, a surer perception of its ambiguous status touches directly on the fields of Gaelic literature and linguistics. Does its fitful correspondence and idiosyncratic break with the Highland heritage of verse and prose, transmitted orally and in writing, throw any new light on these two fields of intellectual inquiry? Can its controversial nature contribute to awakening more widespread interest in Gaelic studies?

Third, investigation of the inner dynamics of its creation is important for the study of Scottish history and Gaelic folklore by illuminating how a mostly spurious construction of the past can adulterate and/or replace received tradition in oral and written form. Even when invented history and fakelore become integral to a culture, the possibilities of their careful differentiation from the native cultural legacy can help to elucidate what is new and inherited in Scotland's evolving nationhood. Probing *Ossian*'s authenticity clarifies how different the canon usually is from the mythology and historical paradigms preserved in Gaelic literature. Excusing Macpherson's fabrication by seeing him as a bard, merely renovating ballad conventions, misses the overwhelming authorial uniqueness and inventiveness that made for a drastic departure from tradition under the guise of fidelity to it. So it is that a majority of Gaelic specialists have come to view him as a mixed blessing, having a contradictory impact on

their discipline: he stimulated the collection of genuine material, even as he caused attention to shift toward his spurious creations and subsequent Ossianic imitations adulterating the native literary heritage.

Fourth, a firmer grasp of *Ossian*'s largely fabricated make-up should be part and parcel of inquiries into the manifold elements of the artistry that made it so overwhelmingly popular with Romantic writers. Was its minimal Gaelic dimension or its predominant Macphersonian sentimentality most responsible for the Ossianic vogue? Fifth and finally, investigation of the genesis of the canon mainly from Macpherson's imagination lays open the complicated mechanics of his authorial procedures for clearer comparison and contrast with the questionable practices of a careless editor like Thomas Percy, outright forgers like brilliant Thomas Chatterton or acerbic John Pinkerton, or unfaithful translators of Gaelic like John Clark and John Smith. All in all, coming to terms with the authenticity issue is obviously central to evaluating the *Ossian* controversy, which indeed helped to make Macpherson famous and continues to spur debate over his triumphs and transgressions.

Polarized attitudes about *Ossian* had existed from the outset of Macpherson's literary career and kept the printing presses busy throughout the later eighteenth century. The climax of the heated, sometimes volcanic, exchange of opinions in the earliest stages of the dispute came in the form of *The Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland* (1805). Evoking contrary responses even now, this nuanced treatise gathered together invaluable documentary evidence about the controversy, with a false-seeming neutrality, to argue that *Ossian* reflected a genuine body of Gaelic poetry substantially refined by Macpherson. Further muddying of the waters surrounding the authenticity issue occurred with the publication of the bogus *Poems of Ossian in the Original Gaelic* (1807), offering false validation of the fabricated English *Ossian* and destined to adulterate Gaelic literary tradition. Countering these developments were major anti-Macphersonian contributions by Malcolm Laing. He wrote a first-rate "Dissertation" exposing deception in his *History of Scotland* (1800), followed in 1805 by his debunking edition of *The Poems of Ossian*, containing important verse juvenilia and a scrupulous, if forced, dissection of modern literary borrowings behind the canon's creation.[15]

While Gaelic specialists in the Victorian age increasingly cast doubt on Macpherson's integrity, printings and defenses of *Ossian* in English appeared regularly in every decade of the nineteenth century. On the continent, moreover, editions appeared in Bohemian, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Swedish and

gave rise to a plethora of critical and creative writing confirming the spread of the Ossianic vogue abroad. At home imitators turned the canon into heroic couplets, blank verse, prose tales, songs, plays, ballet pantomime, and opera. Probably the principal scholarly appreciation of the Victorian era was Bailey Saunders's *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (1894), rich in new documentary evidence but wrongly characterizing *Ossian* as a paraphrase and Johnson as a bigot incompetent to judge it. Sympathy for Macpherson waned during the first half of the twentieth century. A learned three-volume edition of the canon in German by Otto Jiriczek in Nazi-controlled Heidelberg in 1940 could obviously do little to resuscitate critical interest in America and Britain. A few noteworthy studies did enter the public domain, such as J. S. Smart, *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature* (1905) and George F. Black's *Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Contribution towards a Bibliography* (1926), complemented by John J. Dunn's "Macpherson's Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy: A Supplementary Bibliography" (1972) and Margaret M. Smith's "James Macpherson 1736–1796" (1989).[16] In the main, however, curiosity about the controversy suffered a steep decline, not to be reawakened until the Great Depression and two world wars had passed by.

In the same period serious study of Johnson and Boswell followed a contrary trajectory after a long limbo of Victorian condescension and neglect. The authoritative first five volumes of the Hill–Powell edition of *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64) preceded – the index in volume VI followed – the publication of the most significant modern discovery in eighteenth-century literature. This was the treasure trove of journals and papers of James Boswell, starting in the 1930s at Yale University under Frederick A. Pottle and appearing periodically there since 1950. These two scholarly enterprises prepared directly for the remarkable post-World War II renaissance of Johnson studies led by James L. Clifford, Walter Jackson Bate, Donald J. Greene, and others. The result was the standard, as yet incomplete, Yale edition of Johnson's *Works*, including the publication of not one, but two editions of *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* by Mary Lascelles (1971) and, authoritatively, by J. D. Fleeman (1985). Clifford, Greene, John Vance, and Jack Lynch successively compiled *A Bibliography of Johnsonian Studies* from 1887 to 1998 and bore loyal witness to the startling but true phenomenon that no other British author of the eighteenth century has come close to generating more scholarly publication than has Samuel Johnson. At the end of the twentieth century, the complete five-volume collection

of *The Letters of Samuel Johnson* (1992–4) appeared at last, owing to the devoted editorial labor of Bruce Redford. Complementing all this exemplary scholarship was J. D. Fleeman's capstone performance in two volumes, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (2000).[17] In testimony to the by now established centrality of the author in his era, Paul J. Korshin in 1987 inaugurated at the University of Pennsylvania *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*. In the new millennium Harvard University holds the huge Hyde collection to make the Houghton Library the preeminent treasure-house of Johnsoniana in the world.

All this renewed scholarly activity led the way for a reappraisal of Johnson's role in the *Ossian* controversy and for a revival of interest in Macpherson. No more than a trickle of articles about *Ossian* came out in the 1960s, prior to John Whitehead's generally overlooked *This Solemn Mockery: The Art of Literary Forgery* (1973) and Robert Folkenflik's neutral "Macpherson, Chatterton, Blake and the Great Age of Literary Forgery" in *The Centennial Review* (1974). The trend soon changed into a growing torrent of scholarship, partly under the increasing influence of new critical theory, given to anti-canonical, postmodernist, and postcolonial impulses embraced by the academy. With the political prospect of devolution in Scotland, considerable soul-searching about national identity elicited a number of publications. At one extreme were books by Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977) and *After Britain* (2000), in conjunction with David McCrone's *Understanding Scotland* (1992) and Regina Bendix's *In Search of Authenticity* (1997).[18] Theirs was by and large a neo-Marxist denial of ethnic identity and historical tradition as merely a human invention, "useful, powerful fictions," in need of transcendence via egalitarian openness to global diversity as an antidote to racism encouraged by narrow nationalism since the Romantic era. Nairn blames Macpherson, among others, for a "fake Celticism" endowing Scots with a mere "simulacrum of identity" interfering with the evolution of the nation. The animus against *Ossian* among sociologists like Nairn reflects a larger repugnance to deplorable Celtic typecasting lent respectability by a famous fan of Macpherson, Matthew Arnold, in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). Cairns Craig's *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (1996) critiques Nairn's anti-essentialism, and Andrew Hook warns fellow Scots that dismissing Macpherson, no matter his bad faith, risks complicity with imperialistic England in "Ossian Macpherson as Image Maker" (1984).[19] But indulging in any kind of Celtic identity politics received a major setback from an anthropological point of view in Simon James's controversial *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People*

or Modern Invention? (1999): "the idea of race, nation or ethnic group called Celts in Ancient Britain and Ireland is indeed a modern invention" originating in eighteenth-century antiquarian fantasies like James Macpherson's *Ossian*.[20]

Many moderate commentators, who subscribe to the reality of an enduring ethnic inheritance, nevertheless share Nairn's distaste for Ossianic national stereotyping.[21] The most notorious modern debunker of Macphersonian myths has to be Hugh Trevor-Roper, whom not a few *Ossian* enthusiasts consider their *bête noire* because of his contemptuous essay, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition" (1983).[22] Far more sympathetic to Scottish nationalism, if increasingly wary about Ossianic mythology, is Murray Pittock, one of the most prolific and sanest writers about his country's identity. His four earliest books explore the historical legacy of Jacobitism discerningly, granting *Ossian* an undue grounding in Gaelic tradition and yet conceding its "factitious Scottishness" from its "idiosyncratic" accommodations to British tastes.[23] Pittock wisely advises all to see Scottishness "steadily and see it whole" as an "important, nay a crucial premiss in the development of the Scotland and Britain which it will be possible to create in the future." Far from explaining away national identity as an intellectual construct capable of liberatory global reinvention, William Ferguson's thesis in *The Identity of the Scottish Nation* (1998) is essentialist in his insistence on a core historical selfhood shared by the nation.[24] He sees Scottishness, in the Highlands especially, as grounded in a specific past evolving into the present culture of a specific people within a specific place, springing from "an early Gaelic tribal root that flourished in Ireland." If national identity rests on some surviving underlying geographical-historical actuality, then Macpherson's fabricated mythology amounts to a distortion of Scottish character, as it undergoes reassessment at a time of promising, if difficult, transition for the country.

Allied to concerns about *Ossian*'s dubious impact on identity issues past and present is the much-debated topic of the politics behind its creation. Are the canon's basic political sympathies (1) pro-Scottish and/or pro-Jacobite (Pittock's well-argued position), (2) pro-Scottish and pro-Unionist, or (3) simply pro-Unionist? Of these alternatives, the second suits the fundamental ambiguity of *Ossian* as an anglicized Caledonian product of a modern eighteenth-century consciousness coming to terms with an imagined Highland antiquity. Seeing mixed political allegiances in its author as both Scottish citizen and British subject would be congruent with the perception of Macpherson's handiwork as offering an

ambivalent nostalgic vision of an ancient era overtaken by modernity. The merging of present and past, the familiar and the alien, Unionist loyalty and Highland patriotism would seem to have made for stimulating, if unthreatening, reading matter for subjects throughout the British Isles, and not in Scotland alone. Surprisingly, relatively few scholars accept this duality in its make-up. Richard B. Sher does adopt this ambivalent perspective in perhaps the finest single treatment of later eighteenth-century Scotland ever published. His *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1985) ties *Ossian*'s admixture of Scottish and British sympathies to a Unionist-oriented militia question tapping into thwarted feelings of national patriotism north of the English border. Equally superb is Howard Weinbrot's richly comprehensive survey of the literary impact of such political compromise in *Britannia's Issue* (1993). Detailed demonstration of Macpherson's divided loyalties fills the pages of Colin Kidd's *A Union of Multiple Identities* (1997) and Melvyn Kersey's "The Pre-Ossianic Politics of James Macpherson" (2004).[25] So it is that Matthew Wickman sums up the very mixed political allegiances of the Ossianic canon in *The Ruins of Experience: Scotland's "Romantick" Highlands and the Birth of the Modern Witness* (2007):

> the nostalgic tenor of *Ossian* forges a *circumstantial link* to the ambivalent national imaginary – "Scottish" in one register, "Highland Jacobite" in another, "British" in a third – which defined Scottish identity after the Union of 1707.[26]

Most scholars incline, and plausibly so, to a one-sided interpretation of *Ossian*'s political leanings as decidedly pro-Unionist, rendering the canon primarily an instrument of English imperialism rather than an expression of Highland patriotism or of mixed loyalties to both Britain and Scotland. Taking this line are many solid studies, including Kenneth Simpson's *The Protean Scot* (1988), Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (1992) and his *The Modern Poet* (2001), Penny Fielding's *Writing and Orality* (1996), Leith Davis's *Acts of Union* (1998), Sebastian Mitchell's "James Macpherson's Ossian and the Empire of Sentiment" (1999), and K. K. Ruthven's *Faking Literature* (2001). Bearing directly on *Ossian*'s politics are major evaluations of Irish, Scots, and British historiography by Ian Haywood in *The Making of History* (1986), by Joep Th. Leerssen in *Mere Irish and Fior-Ghail: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality* (1986), and by Colin Kidd in *Subverting Scotland's Past* (1993) and *British Identities before Nationalism* (1999).[27] There remains a question, not yet fully addressed, rising out of Macpherson's debated politics and dubious invention of tradition. To what degree is or is not *Ossian* an artistic betrayal of

Scottish/Highland/Gaelic tradition by virtue of its translation into the foreign language of imperial Great Britain under the cultural-literary influences of the dominating superpower, England?

Contamination of the national heritage is a preoccupation of contemporary folklorists. Alan Bruford, like many other Gaelic specialists, holds to enduring narrative prototypes standing behind variant versions of Fenian narratives in *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Medieval Romances* (1969). Granting the manifold possibilities of creative variation in a longstanding heritage of story-telling, some folklorists nonetheless tend to rank *Ossian* as fakelore, generally inventing, rather than following even loosely, ballad conventions. Such is the case put forward by Phyllis A. Harrison in "Samuel Johnson's Folkloristics" (1983), by Alan Dundes in "National Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore" (1985), by Jan Vansina in *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), and by John R. and Margaret M. Gold, *Imagining Scotland* (1995). Other folklorists have come to stress a contrary point of view. The mercurial nature of oral tradition, in their opinion, militates against much inviolability in the Gaelic literary heritage for our making any kind of a determination against the authenticity of *Ossian*. James Porter takes this stand in " 'Bring Me the Head of James Macpherson' " (2001).[28]

In this regard, Donald Meek likens *Ossian* to a freely creative compilation of Fenian tales crafted in the middle ages, entitled *Acallam na Senorach*, as evidence of the absence of any pure form of Fenian narrative. Meek therefore disputes other leading specialists (Derick Thomson specifically) who denigrate Macpherson for literary forgery, when they should commend him for invigorating Gaelic literature, in "Development and Degeneration in Gaelic Ballad Texts" (1987) and in "The Sublime Gael" (2004). Joep Leerssen also argues against "a rarefied philological standard of absolute source-identity" but still concedes Macpherson's "mauvaise foi," in line with Micheal Mac Craith's warning about the Highlander's dubious assurance of restoring Fenian poetry to its original purity, in respectively "Ossian and the Rise of Literary Historicism" (2004) and " 'We Know All These Poems': The Irish Response to Ossian" (2004). Contrary to Meek, Joseph Falaky Nagy distinguishes *Acallam na Senorach* from the "spurious" and "wilder concoctions" of *Ossian* under Macpherson's "ambitious invention" in "Observations on the Ossianesque in Medieval Irish Literature and Modern Irish Folklore" (2001). Ultimately Meek himself contends that, however Gaelic based *Ossian* occasionally may be, its encasing narrative frame "was largely of his own making" for imparting "a new view of the Highlands to the gullible

and expectant public . . . The Ossianic model also tended to contaminate certain aspects of the real tradition." These are the well-taken conclusions of Meek's major work of scholarship, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (2000). Thus he and Thomson seem in final accord about Macpherson's ambiguous legacy. The fact that *Ossian* has little or no place in Thomson's surveys of Gaelic verse – *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (1974) and *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century* (1993) – speaks volumes about its spurious relation to Highland literature.[29]

For the past quarter-century revisionist scholars have led a laudable reconsideration of Macpherson's canon. A proliferation of worthwhile analyses has resulted, with no end in sight. Four individuals stand out among many others responsible for this signal development. Fiona Stafford published a full-scale appreciation of Macpherson's achievement, omitting his political career, in *The Sublime Savage* (1988). Another biocritical study, *James Macpherson* (1989) by Paul DeGategno, offers an even more candid treatment of the authenticity issue and a more detailed, if equally sympathetic, review of individual works. Most important, Howard Gaskill spurred the revisionism with his " 'Ossian' Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation" (1986) and afterwards promoted reappraisals as editor of three collections of essays, which are particularly persuasive about Macpherson's international impact.[30] These contributions are *Ossian Revisited* (1991), *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (1998), co-edited with Stafford, and *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (2004). His premier achievement is the standard modern edition of *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (1996), generally non-partisan, based on the 1765 *Works of Ossian*, with useful notes and glossary. Supplementing this edition is Dafydd Moore's welcome four-volume *Ossian and Ossianism* (2004). This publication can save researchers much time and trouble required for archival and on-line inquiry by gathering together facsimile reprints of all Macpherson's first editions (volumes I and II), generous extracts of early literary criticism about *Ossian* to 1827 (volume III), and an admirable sampling of creative writings of the Ossianic vogue through 1826 (volume IV).[31] The general introduction is an evenhanded survey of the controversy, and the only omission – acknowledged by the editor – is the absence of another volume collecting genuine Gaelic literature (with faithful English translations) bearing on the disputed creation of *Ossian*.

Revisionist scholars often ground their primary defense of *Ossian*'s greatness on its undoubted influence on later Romantic literature. From 1974 into the new millennium, ten or so studies have regarded

Macpherson as Romantic forerunner of the poet as prophet, in line with attempts at improving his reputation by shifting the focus away from the pejorative charge of literary lying. The most significant champion of this theme is Nick Groom, a leading authority on Thomas Percy and antiquarianism as a result of three excellent publications graced with careful traditional scholarship: a facsimile first edition of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1996); a careful examination of context and content in *The Making of Percy's Reliques* (1999); and a collection of essays under his editorship, *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture* (1999). Most recently he has contributed a comprehensive apologia on behalf of literary forgery, primarily in Britain from the mid-eighteenth century to the present, entitled *The Forger's Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (2002).[32] The very title hints at the intellectual exuberance and playful flair for semantics on display in this encyclopedic inquiry about forgery and literary creation. The book seems at its best in matters of copyright and in connecting Chatterton and fellow writers to Romanticism and literary inspiration. Where it departs from Johnson's dictates about truth and literature is in its emphasis on artistic vision transcending representational norms of classical mimesis and allowing the factually false to become imaginatively true.

Its insightful manipulation of a kind of postmodernist Romanticism seems to render truth itself a questionable hypothesis preferably to be eschewed in discussions of forgery: "But society is reluctant to allow that truth might be merely an ideological special effect, and so fixes it as an abstract ideal, outside history. This is why criticism is compelled to condemn forgeries" (*The Forger's Shadow*, 65). This critical perspective erases much of a dichotomy between legitimate fiction and illegitimate forgery in the supposition that forgery creates a "hybrid realism, both true and false" (15). According to this merging of what Johnson deemed ontological opposites (see his *Dictionary* definitions of *truth*, "the contrary to falsehood" and *false* as "not morally true," "not physically true"), forgery deserves serious consideration through avoidance of society's arbitrary and derogatory significations of a falsehood:

> It is not enough to accuse forgeries of simply being deceitful and morally wrong; it is precisely by being able to break out into the real, to make the literary more real, that they can tell us a bit more about how literature works. Of course it could be argued that this book *by tricking away the authentic, is a part of the condition or crisis it is purporting to diagnose – which is doubtless the case* – but my intention is really to encourage [others to read poetry] a little differently. (15; emphasis added)

Although Johnson would heartily have objected to this "tricking away" of the authentic, we are encouraged to put aside old-fashioned moral distinctions and understand that Macpherson's falsehood is his imagined truth: "Inspiration is a form of composition that guarantees the authenticity of the poetic self precisely because it lies outside that self, in some other region" (106). We should avoid pejorative terms and meaningless value judgments which, it is contended, seem irrelevant to artistic inspiration and bar Macpherson, and others like him, from the mainstream of literature:

> Can forgery be defined without a debilitating recourse to words like real, true, or authentic? . . . What we are reading here is literature and it should be judged on aesthetic terms: whether it is good or bad, influential or indifferent . . . (55–6)

Such relativistic commingling of contrarieties was, as the book acknowledges, anathema to Johnson. He could never have subscribed to a true and false realism, because, in his opinion, reality, in itself or as reflected in legitimate fiction, was truth and remained in contradistinction to the false as reflected in forgery and fantasy. By extension, he could not have condoned the elimination of ethical concerns in judgments about literature, which at its best was to imitate lived experience and point to higher moral and religious verities glimpsed in lived experience. Because art acquired its dignity and purpose from an honest and instructive mirroring of human life, literature would suffer ultimate degradation from a failure to distinguish between truth and falsehood in fiction, between true making based on the actual world and a false making-up of deliberate deception and empty fantasy. As Terry Eagleton noted,

> Literary propositions are parodies of real-life ones, not versions of real-life lies . . . Such terms [like real, true, or authentic] may have a debilitating ring to them [revisionist critics like Groom] in Soho clubs, but perhaps rather less so among those families who still want to know where the Bosnian Serbs buried the bodies.[33]

A modern audience, unlike Johnson, might relish indulging in arresting intellectual concepts expressing a contrariness reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's rebellious paradoxes. Wildean echoes of an aesthete's praise for lying and regret over its decay under Victorian moral earnestness reverberate in assertions like the following: "All poets are liars; some are better liars than others; those who lie with the most effrontery are called forgers" (65) in the annals of "literature, that most monumental fabrication" (2), because "[a]rtistic invention remains an endorsed form of lying, of

defrauding an audience by bewitching with illusions that blur the sense of emotional or psychic reality" (71). Johnson would have considered disturbing and sophistical such obscuring of boundaries between fiction and falsehood and such Romantic elevation of visionary artistry over mimetic imperatives in authorship. In his scheme of things, the shocking statements would have amounted to a perverse denial of a difference between right and wrong in any reckoning of literary authority or artistic procedures. History and human experience had priority over fiction, however exquisite or even soundly reality-based in its execution: "The most artful fiction must give way to truth."[34]

One does not have to be a Samuel Johnson to sense problematic points of discussion in Groom's chapter on Macpherson. The positions taken there merit more than passing consideration as representative of a critical approach adopted by other revisionists in recent decades. For example, a description of Macpherson's workmanship expresses not only multifold options for his creative process but also the kind of imprecision found in studies by like-minded scholars desirous of disassociating him from the stigma of fabrication: "He had translated and edited, or written, or indeed forged, depending on one's point of view, one of the most extraordinary works of the age" (109). Sidestepping the authenticity issue might seem at first glance a matter of praiseworthy openness to intellectual possibilities of worthwhile literature, free of stuffy outmoded moral prejudice against Macpherson. But on deeper reflection we might feel concern for uninitiated readers puzzling over this potentially confusing assessment of *Ossian*'s complex creation. As Pat Rogers wisely warns admirers of Chatterton, in Nick Groom's own collection of essays, "Even if we wish to argue that such deception could still promote valuable literary innovation, which few today would dispute, it is still necessary for us to *know* the extent of the deception if we are to assess the scale and importance of the innovation."[35]

The need for a clearer understanding of Macpherson's literary methods is just as pressing for evaluating the scale and importance of his contribution to Western literature. Almost every Gaelic specialist agrees that his *Temora* exploits sources very meagerly – only in the opening episode of Oscar's death – out of eight long books of made-up epic narrative. Even the six-part *Fingal*, for all its complex use of Gaelic antecedents, is mainly the product of Macpherson's creative imagination in its book-by-book unfolding. His claim of retrieving an ancient archetype corresponding exactly to his English prose was nonsense. What follows is Nick Groom's very different explanation of the Gaelic

roots of the two epics, with clarifying remarks duly inserted in brackets as helpful correctives:

> Macpherson really did collect manuscripts and transcribe traditional songs, and Fingal and Temora were in large part [not so] derived from these remains. But he also fashioned his own interpolations [actually he fashioned the bulk of the canon] to fill his gaps or lacunae, or to replace obscure or inconsistent readings [as the partisan and obsolete 1805 *Report of the Highland Society* tentatively concluded], and so his "translation" was effectively a paraphrase [wrong; no substantial, sustained paraphrasing exists in either epic, beyond scattered passages], carefully adapted to [actually concocted largely for] the tastes of his eighteenth-century readers. Such freedom is typical of the bardic tradition itself [his was an idiosyncratic departure from Fenian tradition, most Gaelic specialists say], and Macpherson was virtually composing as a "bard" [true, an original author but falsely advertising himself as a literal translator]: reworking [utterly transforming from slender resources] Ossianic stories, themes, and language into an epic [mainly of his own devising devoid of any significantly authentic corresponding Gaelic archetype] to celebrate the mythic past [principally a self-invented history] and clarify [really distort by fabrication, according to devolution-era Scots commentators] the identity of post-Jacobite Scotland. In other words, Macpherson was "reinventing" *Ossian* [no, he inclined toward sheer invention with relatively little recourse to Ossianic literature] by developing a new poetry of contemporary myth [of his creation based on a "discovery" of nonexistent iron-age poetry palmed off as true tradition and faithful English transcription]. The charge of forgery is just too flippant an explanation [why so, if the charge of falsehood is demonstrably accurate and at times conceded to be so by Nick Groom himself?]. (111–12)

Overestimating Macpherson's indebtedness to genuine Gaelic literature not only misstates the case seriously but also robs him of the distinction of authorship. It seems the wrong perspective for a book aiming to vindicate him and fellow creators of essentially original writing, who showed how forgery changed the course of literature. Giving Macpherson his due, by telling the whole truth about *Ossian* and taking the bitter with the better, would make him more than a bard standing on the shoulders of predecessors merely reworking Fenian conventions. He would emerge more or less as a self-created genius of self-invented myth whose enduring inspiration for Romantics is a matter of historical record. Some might dispute the conclusion that he directly paved the way for poetry of exhilarating Romantic vision as unduly aggrandizing his place in the annals of literature. But should this particular premise of *The Forger's Shadow* survive critical scrutiny and become widely accepted, his reputation would surely benefit immensely from the establishing of his stature as an original author.

In this chapter and elsewhere in *The Forger's Shadow* readers might take note of a few other questionable assertions, which, granting the considerable merits of the book as a whole, do qualify as misrepresentations of Johnson. Insisting that Johnson's angry confrontation with Macpherson amounts to a "fable – a fake even" (108) stage-managed by Boswell the biographer is just wrong and in defiance of overwhelming evidence to the contrary set forth in chapter 4 below. Labeling Johnson the "arch-pragmatist" (205), allegedly undervaluing inspiration in literary creation ("he did fervently believe that writing literature and criticism was an activity of application rather than inspiration," 114), risks flirting with the same reductive stereotyping that revisionist scholars censure for marring the study of Macpherson. Johnson certainly appreciated genius behind artistic inspiration in others and described it memorably in his *Life of Pope*:

> Pope had likewise genius; a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights, still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do.[36]

Finally, there is a misreading of his *Life of Milton*. Johnson supposedly "damns" (205) Milton for the transcendent subject matter of his Christian epic (not so) because of his inconsistent use of the agency of spirits, "mixing materiality with immateriality" (this may be so but it is not an overall censure of the transcendent Miltonic vision). In the same vein, Johnson allegedly "belittles Milton at every opportunity" (206) for being spanked in college, looking like a little girl, and falsely libeling Charles I. On the contrary, Johnson sought to clarify dubious and/or exaggerated reports wrongly demeaning or overly glorifying Milton's literary preeminence. We are also told that "Johnson concludes by declaring that Milton is 'to be admired rather than imitated' before the rather hollow judgement that 'The highest praise of genius is original invention' " (206–7). This is inaccurate. In fact, Johnson wrote that Milton "is to be admired rather than imitated" in his use of blank verse, and even that trifling reservation fades away before the notable qualification preceding the statement: "But, whatever be the advantage of rhyme, I cannot prevail on myself to wish that Milton had been a rhymer; for I cannot wish his work to be other than it is, yet, like other heroes, he is to be admired rather than imitated."[37] Nor did Johnson ever render anything like a hollow judgment about his subject's inventiveness. He did dislike Milton's religion and politics, to be sure; he could express sometimes niggling objections

to specific works and aspects of the canon, but ultimately he gave Milton all due credit for his singular achievement in heroic poetry. In Johnson's estimation, original invention made Milton second only to Homer among all poets. Johnson's conclusion, like much else in the critique of *Paradise Lost*, is anything but carping. What we discover at the close is a moving act of obeisance to breathtaking genius: "he was born for whatever is arduous; and his work is not the greatest of heroick poems, only because it is not the first" (*Milton*, 1: 295).

Specialists in the requisite fields will have to determine matters of importance beyond the scope of this book. Did literary forgery really change the course of post-Enlightenment literature? Should ethical considerations affect reader-response to texts and the status of authors in mainstream literature? Did fabricated literature like *Ossian* cast a beneficent or malignant spell on truth-seeking Romantic visionaries coming later? The answer in *The Forger's Shadow* is a confident affirmative but comes close to being a *non sequitur* in its articulation: "Macpherson's literary integrity is in any case surely proven by the considerable fascination he exercises across the western world" (112–13). Does "integrity" mean something besides honesty? We should ask whether enduring popularity and widespread influence are in themselves convincing evidence of literary integrity and literary worth. It must be conceded that authenticity and literary worth do not necessarily go hand in hand and that there are no easy answers for distinguishing truth, fiction, and falsehood. But a thorough relativism is not the answer, even though it may be difficult to define deception and to explain what is wrong with it in absolute philosophical terms. Because deception collided with historicity and had a potential for sowing confusion in the extra-literary world, Johnson had to condemn it, or everyday life and one's perception of everyday life threatened to become meaningless.

Ossian certainly wielded an immense influence on Romantic authors like Wordsworth, who, however, came to believe that an authentic literary response to nature could not reside in second-rate Augustan verse or in Ossianic flights of fraudulent fancy, as he declared in his *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface* [to the *Excursion*] (1814). The *Essay* expressed his injured sense of recent critical neglect for having inaugurated a new visionary simplicity in defiance of the contrived poetry popular with his contemporaries. He saw Johnson as a champion of artificiality in English literature, despite glimmers of "true simplicity and genuine pathos" from Johnson's close associate, Bishop Percy, in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.[38] But a starker absence of authenticity plagued *Ossian*. It was a

dangerously fashionable body of work, whose false bottom of made-up artistic form and substance devoid of genuine Gaelic genius ensured its emptiness as meaningful literature of vision. Macpherson came in for severe criticism as a Macbeth-like pretender to the literary throne and a Satanic begetter of a deadly new line of poetry (alluding to Milton's Sin and Death) for a fallen world of artistic creation:

> All hail, Macpherson! Hail to thee, Sire, of Ossian! The Phantom was begotten by the snug embrace of an impudent Highlander upon a cloud of tradition . . . and the thin Consistence took its course through Europe, upon the breath of popular applause . . . (3:77)

Wordsworth weakened his argument by denying *Ossian*'s immense impact on Romantic prose and poetry for proof of how "essentially unnatural" Macpherson's works were. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's thoughtful, if defensive, reservations about the "essentially unnatural" character of *Ossian* in its imagery of nature ("words are substituted for things") and in its representation of Highland antiquity might well induce scholars to reexamine the relationship of literary authenticity to literary inspiration in creating Romantic poetry and prose of valid vision, "true simplicity and genuine pathos." Authenticity, at least for Wordsworth, was one of the prerequisites for a poet's seeing and singing truth.

Despite serious differences in outlook, Wordsworth and Johnson would have agreed that nothing but access to genuine Gaelic tradition could reveal to poets and others the truth of nature and human life in the Highlands. A lovely lyric, "Written in a Blank Leaf of Macpherson's Ossian," contains a compelling exhortation for literary truth at all costs, in reaction to a half-century of literary deception and Ossianic controversy:

> Spirit of Ossian! If imbound
> In language thou may'st yet be found,
> If aught (intrusted to the pen
> Or floating on the tongues of men,
> Albeit shattered and impaired)
> Subsist thy dignity to guard,
> In concert with memorial claim
> Of old gray stone, and high-born name
> That cleaves to rock or pillared cave
> Where moans the blast, or beats the wave,
> Let Truth, stern arbitress of all,
> Interpret that Original,
> And for presumptuous wrongs atone; –
> Authentic words be given, or none![39]

CHAPTER 2

James Macpherson's violation of literary truth

> Forgery is one of the most dangerous and extensive evils to which men are subjected by the combinations of society and the regulations of civil life. Sir Robert Chambers, *A Course of Lectures on the English Law* (1766–70)

A biographical sketch is in order: the perpetrator of literary deception was an ambitious young author, large of frame and irritable in disposition, who was university educated but lacking a degree. Wanting to escape the obscurity of schoolteaching, he made his bid for literary fame in the metropolis by publishing some anonymous poetry. Notoriety, however, was difficult to come by, until he turned to the first major project of his writing career. This was a work of almost complete fabrication, composed rather quickly over several years and based on very meager original materials or, mostly, none at all. From slight cues he invented a whole cast of characters and imposed a monotone declamatory style of high drama on his literary creation for a pervasive nobility of sentiment. Initially he probably felt no serious qualms of conscience about a seemingly harmless manipulation of minimal sources, as the duped public responded well to his efforts. His virtual authorship, despite hints and suspicions, remained widely unknown until after his death, and burial in Westminster Abbey crowned his worldly successes. This is the true story of James Macpherson, creator of *Ossian* (1760–3), and this is the true story of Samuel Johnson, creator of the *Parliamentary Debates* (*ca*. 1740–3). These future adversaries both launched their careers by a literary fraud, but with a fundamental difference that speaks volumes about character and its absence in the human spirit. On the one hand, a guilt-ridden Johnson privately tendered warnings to the unwary and, virtually on his deathbed, took pains to make amends by identifying his debates for posterity. On the other hand, Macpherson went to his grave perpetrating

literary fraud by helping to make public a false Gaelic "original" to validate his mainly counterfeit English *Ossian*.

Johnson's tender conscience was integral to his standing as England's greatest moralist. His later fame as the foremost debunker of Macpherson's fabricating ways suited his canonical reputation as a truth-teller in literature then and now. What follows is the fullest investigation of Macpherson's literary deception to date. It can be demonstrated, with a satisfactory degree of probability, that Johnson's inference about the essentially spurious nature of the *Ossian* works was correct, despite professions to the contrary by some recent scholars. Painstaking examination of old Gaelic literature, in consultation with Gaelic specialists and by recourse to professional Gaelic studies, by Derick S. Thomson in particular, only confirms his insight and elucidates the complex reality of Macpherson's imposture by reference to his creative process. The result of that inquiry is compellingly clear. The Ossianic canon is almost completely Macpherson's invention. Twenty-eight out of his thirty-nine titles – 72 percent of all the individual works comprising *Ossian* – have no apparent antecedents in genuine Gaelic literature and are therefore entirely his own handiwork. The remaining eleven pieces, or 28 percent of the titles, have but generally loose ties to approximately sixteen Gaelic ballads. Meticulous comparison of these works with their sources shows that even the relatively small Gaelic-based portion of *Ossian* similarly qualifies as largely Macpherson's creation. Contrary to his claims, Macpherson was no editor or translator of ancient poetry. He was an author of new, and historically bogus, literature. As Johnson had charged, Macpherson committed literary fabrication.

Distantly behind *Ossian* are Gaelic myths shared by Ireland and the Highlands about Cuchulain and especially Fionn, set respectively in the first and third centuries and surviving in Gaelic tales primarily after the twelfth century. Despite earlier references to the Fionn story in Scotland, the oldest extant Scots-Gaelic manuscript of literature on the subject is the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* (*ca*. 1512–42), which Macpherson recovered for posterity. Fenian tales have several recurrent features from the time of the early modern era and possess a remarkable degree of correspondence even in wildly variant versions. Often a blind old Oisin laments change for a vanished Gaelic military society, as he debates St. Patrick over the merits of Christian versus pagan mores. The stories extol a heroic code for a stalwart band of famous warriors and emphasize graphic battles, hunting, resisting (often Norse) invasions, visiting nobility or receiving (often Norse) guests, and abducting or rescuing female strangers. Born into