ON THE OSSIANIC CONTROVERSY.

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READ AT THE MEETING OF THE HISTORICAL SECTION, MEETING OF THE INSTITUTE IN EDINBURGH, JULY 24, 1856.

I HAVE been requested to prepare a memoir on the Ossianic question, and I have agreed to do so, though with considerable diffidence, as I feel that I possess few qualifications for the task, except a desire to treat it impartially. I cannot boast of any knowledge of the Celtic languages; but possibly some may think that a knowledge of Celtic, and an absence of partiality, are incompatible things.

The principal considerations to which I propose to call attention arise out of a Highland MS., which, although known for many years, has only lately been examined in a satisfactory manner. In order to understand the bearings of this evidence, it will be necessary to resume, in a general way, the history and nature of the controversy. Some of my hearers will remember when it raged in full fury, while to the younger part of them it will sound like some of the songs to which it relates, telling

> "Of old unhappy far off things,
> And battles long ago."

In 1760 James Macpherson published his "Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language," a work of small bulk, consisting only of seventy pages of diminutive quarto, but destined to exert a powerful and permanent influence upon British and European literature. The nature of this announcement implied that the contents of the book were not to be found in any perfect state in an original form. They were merely "fragments collected in the Highlands;" but the poems of Fingal and Temora, which soon followed, were given as proper epics, and other compositions were added to the collection of very suspicious regularity.

The pretensions put forward on behalf of these poems were

of the most ambitious kind. They were represented as the genuine compositions of a poet living in the third century of the Christian era, and narrating personal or contemporary events. The poet was Ossian, the son of Fin or Fingal, and father of Oscar, and these heroes were depicted as natives or inhabitants of Scotland, where they reigned or ruled as prosperous princes, waging war with the Romans and with other nations in their neighbourhood.

It must be confessed that, at least to superficial readers, the compositions presented a plausible and consistent picture of the scenes and persons introduced, though these were not in all respects in accordance with received history. It was not the universal opinion previously that Scotland in the third century was peopled by inhabitants of Gaelic blood; nor could it be affirmed that Fin, or Fingal, and his friends, so far as hitherto known, had been uniformly reputed to be Scotchmen. These points, however, if Macpherson's Ossian was genuine, were thereby set at rest, and the Highlands of Scotland, at that early period, were shown to be the seat of arts as well as of arms, and to be adorned by the diversified accomplishments of exalted heroes and brilliant poets, whose deeds and songs were worthy of each other, and the records of whose valour and genius had been transmitted for a space of 1500 years, without their merits having transpired beyond the districts where they were found.

It was Macpherson's statement that the originals of his "Fragments" were obtained partly from MSS. and partly from oral recitation. But it is certain that in his lifetime no ancient MS. of any part of the poems was exhibited or seen. What he collected from recitation could only be known to himself, and can now only be conjectured by ascertaining what has been found by trustworthy persons travelling over the same ground.

The diversity of opinions which arose upon the publication of Macpherson's Ossian is too well known to require notice, and it would be tedious to go over its details. Dr. Hugh Blair, a popular Scotch preacher, but a credulous critic, wrote a dissertation which, in the opinion of his friends, demonstrated "with the acuteness of Aristotle and the elegance of Longinus," that Macpherson's Ossian was as genuine as Homer and as full of genius. Dr. Samuel Johnson, who was readily deceived by Lauder's forgeries

against Milton, but who would not have believed anything good of Scotland though one had risen from the dead, denounced the publication of Macpherson as an impudent imposture. The controversy, as was natural, extended speedily to Ireland, where the same feelings of nationality which on this side of the channel had raised up defenders of the authenticity of the poems, were roused and arrayed in the strongest manner in opposition to them. Irish antiquaries maintained that Fin and Ossian and Oscar were historically known, and had always been traditionally treated as natives of Ireland, and they regarded the attempt to settle them in Scotland as downright robbery or man-stealing. Another foe of Macpherson's, of no ordinary abilities, arose in the historian Malcolm Laing, who, in "Lord Cockburn's Memorials," is ludicrously and rather unfortunately described as having "a hard peremptory Celtic manner and accent." Mr. Laing was an Orkney proprietor, with strong antipathies to everything Celtic, and as a Norseman he had a natural jealousy of the attempt to represent the Celts as rivalling or excelling the ancient poets of Scandinavia.

In the course of the discussion many volunteer communications of Highland poetry were furnished, some of them not more free from question than Macpherson's own ; while assertions were made, and affidavits sworn, more remarkable for their energy and confidence than for their accuracy and precision. The Highland Society of Scotland then took up the inquiry. But their Report, in 1805, did not throw much light on the matter, and was about as unsatisfactory as Reports in general are found to be. Neither was the question settled by the posthumous publication of the Gaelic Ossian from Macpherson's repositories, no ancient MS. having yet been forthcoming, and his opponents alleging confidently that Macpherson's Gaelic was translated from the English wherever it was not stolen or borrowed from Irish poems.

After much waste of ink, anger, and acrimony, the agitation gradually subsided. The out-and-out defenders of Macpherson's Ossian became few in number, and, strange to say, were more easily found among the critics of the Continent than among those at home. The claims of the Irish, which were ably put forward, were not satisfactorily answered, and, by a general feeling everywhere, bystanders

came to adopt a sort of compromise between the extreme views of the original disputants.

I propose now to state what appears to me to be the result of a fair review of the evidence brought down to the present time, and, in so doing, I am led more particularly to notice the MS. to which I adverted in the outset of this memoir.

In the course of the investigations which took place under the auspices of the Highland Society, reference was made to several Gaelic MSS. as existing in the Highlands or in the possession of parties connected with Scotland. It is very probable, if not quite certain, that such MSS. existed, though it is difficult to place implicit confidence in the loose accounts given of their contents. But the most important MS. actually seen by impartial persons, is that to which I have already alluded, and which is referred to in the Report of the Highland Society. It was got by them from Mr. John Mackenzie, Secretary to the Highland Society of London, and one of Mr. Macpherson's executors. It is a collection of poems which appears to have belonged to James M'Gregor, Dean of Lismore: an account of it is given by Dr. Donald Smith in the Appendix to the Highland Society's Report. I cannot help saying, however, that that account is extremely imperfect, and does not appear to have been very ingenuous, as it keeps out of view several matters that would not have advanced the opinions which Dr. Smith entertained on the question in dispute. The MS. is now the property of the Faculty of Advocates, and has been carefully examined by a gentleman of high attainments as a Celtic scholar—the Rev. Thomas M'Lauchlan, of the Free Gaelic Church in Edinburgh—and who, I am certain, has given the result of his examination with a strict regard to truth and fairness; but I ought to add that Mr. M'Lauchlan is not responsible for any of the conclusions which I have deduced from the MS. in this paper. The MS. has also been carefully inspected by Mr. David Laing.

I shall now notice some of the points brought out by the examination and analysis of this MS. Its date may be assigned to the first half of the XVIth century—not, certainly an ancient date, but a date old enough to have an important bearing on the question at issue. The Gaelic is not written according to the rules of etymological spelling,

but according to what appears to have been the vulgar or prevailing pronunciation of the day. Whether this circumstance is the result of ignorance, as the Irish antiquaries allege, or proceeds, as Mr. M'Lauchlan thinks, from a systematic plan of adopting a proper phonetic orthography, I am unable to determine; nor is it of much consequence to the question. The MS. contains a miscellaneous collection of Gaelic poems, some of them undoubtedly Irish, and some of them undoubtedly Scotch. The poems of Irish and Scotch origin, to which I now refer, are independent altogether of those Ossianic poems which it also contains, and which form the debateable land between the two countries. The poems of unequivocal nationality are ascribed in the MS. to well-known bards or composers of both nations, such as O'Daly in Ireland and M'Vurrich in Scotland, and relate respectively to Irish and Scottish themes.

Of the Ossianic poems, the poems ascribed to Ossian, or in his style, it is important to notice that there are several in which Ossian is personally introduced, but in a manner quite at variance with the Scottish theory, or the version of Macpherson.

"In the fragments contained in this MS.," Mr. M'Lauchlan observes in his remarks upon it, furnished to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, "we have unquestionably the names which appear in Macpherson's publication — Fingal, Gaul the son of Morni, Oscar the son of Ossian, Garve the son of Starno, the Danes, Cuchullin, &c. Without doubt, if Macpherson's Ossian be an imposture, he has made use of persons and names familiar for centuries to every native Highlander. The only peculiarity in the case of the fragments in the MS. under consideration is the frequent introduction of St. Patrick. There are numerous dialogues between the Saint and Ossian, and many of the poems are addressed by the latter to the former. This may be the consequence of later monkish interpolations, Ossian being represented as a convert of St. Patrick's. The Christianity of the poet, however, is of a somewhat questionable order. If these passages belong to the original composition, *they would fix the era of Ossian as being that of St. Patrick, and would also indicate that his country was not Scotland, but Ireland.*"

This is the candid testimony of a modern Celtic scholar of Scotland, forming, I think, a singular and very favourable contrast to the course pursued by some of his predecessors. Mr. M'Lauchlan observes—"We do not find the name of St. Patrick in any part of Macpherson's Ossian." That is quite true, and quite intelligible in connection with Macpherson's views and objects. But what shall we say of the candour or care of the Highland Society of 1805? or rather of Dr. Donald Smith, their adviser and interpreter? Dr. Smith in the Appendix to the Society's Report, describes the MS. we are now considering as "the most valuable of the ancient MSS. procured by the Society." It was to be expected, therefore, that the evidence of this most valuable MS. on such an occasion would be brought forward fairly and fully, whether for or against the particular side which the doctor espoused. But, except what may be concealed under a general reference to a resemblance with another collection, that of Kennedy, which had been taken from recitation, I have been unable to find anything in Dr. Smith's account of it, that could explicitly indicate, nor is it possible that anybody could from that source discover, what is now certain, that the Ossianic poems, as they stand in this MS., show that they were composed at least after the time of St. Patrick, and that according to them Fingal and his friends were Irish and not Scotch.

I shall read as a specimen of these poems in the MS. the following extract given by Mr. M'Lauchlan :—

"Ossian the son of Fingal said—
Tell me, Patrick, the honour which belongs to us,
Do the Fingalians of Ireland enjoy the happy heaven?
I tell thee assuredly, Ossian of bold deeds,
That neither thy father, nor Gaul, nor Oscar, are in heaven.
Sad is thy tale to me, O Priest,
I worshipping God, and that the Fingalians of Ireland should be excluded from heaven.
Is it not well for thee to be blessed thyself,
Although Caoilt, and Oscar, and thy father should not share thy blessedness?
I care little for any blessedness above
Unless shared with Caoilt, and Oscar, and my father!
Better for thee to see the countenance of the Son of Heaven
Than that thou shouldst possess all the gold in the world."

There can be no doubt that some such lines as those we

have now quoted were traditionally current in the Highlands. The Prayers of Ossian, orally collected by Mr. Hill and others, are of a similar character. But here the lines are found in a MS.—the "most valuable" MS. which the Highland Society possessed—the only Scotch MS. that had any bearing on the question. The poem or dialogue between Ossian and St. Patrick here given from the Scotch MS., or some similar one, has long been well-known in Ireland. A translation, nearly corresponding with it, was given in Lady Morgan's "Wild Irish Girl" in 1806; and a similar poem is to be found in a volume lately published by the Ossianic Society of Dublin. Miss Brooke's collection also contains similar colloquies, and the subject seems to have been a favourite one. Such conversations, indeed, between Christian missionaries and converts from Paganism are of common occurrence in early chronicles. A well-known example is to be found in the story of Radbod King of Friesland, who presented himself to Bishop Wulfram for baptism, but desired an answer to one question, whether on arriving at Heaven he should find his forefathers there. Being assured that their locality lay in the opposite direction, he withdrew from the font, declaring that he preferred being in hell with those illustrious men to being in heaven with a few miserable Christians and their clergy.

Mr. M'Lauchlan also points out that several of the Ossianic poems in the Dean of Lismore's MS. relate to events considered historical, and of which the scene occurs in Ireland. It is a singular, but, I believe, undoubted fact, that poems on the Battle of Gabhra, which must be considered as of Irish origin, have been current in the Highlands until a very late period. They have probably been handed down partly by oral tradition, but possibly also by occasional recurrence to written copies.

In the MS. now noticed, Mr. M'Lauchlan points out several historical incidents which agree with those in Macpherson's Ossian. "We have the death of Oscar in p. 230 of the MS., and in the first book of Macpherson's 'Temora.' We have the story of Faineasolis, the Maid of Craca of Macpherson's 'Fingal,' in p. 220 of the MS., and several other similar instances." But the most remarkable instance of agreement between Macpherson and the MS. is found in the well-known story of Cuchullin and his son

Conlaoch, which is known in the Highlands, and is to be found in Irish MSS., and which Macpherson has paraphrased under his poem of "Carthon." It is singular, however, that many of the passages, which must have been taken from poems like those in the MS., are in Macpherson's Gaelic left blank, so as not to admit of accurate comparison.

It would be an interesting task to examine minutely Macpherson's work, and to compare it with the present MS., and with well-known Irish poems, and ascertain how much can be traced to those sources. My impression is, that a considerable portion of Macpherson's book would be accounted for in this manner, though possibly not in long continuous passages.

The earliest poems of the Irish themselves indicate a close intercourse and alliance with some of the inhabitants of Scotland; and the Finian heroes, in so far as their existence and character can be considered historical—as to which I give no opinion—seem not to have been confined to Ireland, but to have been diffused over Scotland, and even Scandinavia and its dependencies. How far Fin and the Finians are to be held as merely mythical, is a question which I am unable to discuss. There is probably much to be done before these subjects can be fully matured. There seems also room for considerable inquiry into the effect of Christianity on the poetry of the Gaelic tribes, and how far any remains of Pagan composition are imbedded in their poems as they now stand. In some cases the operation of Christianity has been to destroy, in others to preserve, the Pagan poetry. Charlemagne delighted to collect the ancient songs of his race. Lewis, his successor, seems to have tried to extirpate them. The Pagan poetry of the Anglo-Saxons has been very partially preserved, and was in a great degree superseded by Christian compositions, while the Icelandic Edda was the compilation of a Christian priest eager to collect the traditions of the heathen times before they should wholly disappear. It might deserve attention how far the oldest dialogues between Ossian and St. Patrick, or any similar poems, show indications of different strata of thought or language. But this is a task fit only for the most delicate and judicious exercise of high philological skill.

I may here observe, that because poems exist in which Ossian and St. Patrick are introduced as conversing together,

it does not, therefore, follow that Ossian and St. Patrick were contemporaries, or that the songs were written in St. Patrick's age. All that is proved is that, in their present shape, they were not written before that date, but they may, and probably were, written several centuries afterwards, and the apparent anachronism may be the result either of error or of legendary belief.

Neither must it be supposed that if I comment on the want of evidence in support of the claims of the Highland traditions to a high antiquity, I am prepared to acknowledge the pretensions of the Irish in all respects. I think a great deal of absurdity has been spoken on the subject on both sides of the Channel, such as might lead us to suspect that both countries were partially peopled from a portion of the south-west of France, rather celebrated for its exaggerations. The Irish have very good claims to antiquity, but by adding fable to fact they have, I think, endangered their true position in the estimation of sober-minded men. But the time for critical inquiry is come, and it ought now to be the object of all to distinguish certainty from conjecture, and probable inference from wild imagination.

It is extremely difficult, and perhaps impossible, to tell from what quarter the Gaelic population of these islands first came, or on what shore they first settled. I believe that most of the traditions that assign fixed dates to ancient immigration are inaccurate. The invasion of Hengist and Horsa is probably a myth. There appear to have been for many centuries a series of arrivals of Teutons on the east of England as well as of Scotland ; and in like manner the west coast of Scotland and the east coast of Ireland may have been peopled by the same inhabitants at an indefinite period before those events of which we have positive historical evidence.

Reviewing now the whole subject, I think that the following propositions may be considered to contain correct results in reference to the subject of this controversy. 1st, The Celtic language of Ireland and that of the Scottish Highlands is one and the same, and there is the strongest probability that, with various degrees of Scandinavian, Teutonic, or other foreign admixture, the two races are identical. 2nd, Whatever may have been the early state of the Scottish Highlands, it is certain that, at least from the

introduction of Christianity, Ireland possessed a high degree of learning and civilisation. 3rd, The Irish language from the same early period was carefully cultivated, and continued to be preserved in purity ; and elaborate forms of poetry or versification were invented and extensively practised by Irish writers. 4th, Mythical persons and legends, as well as historical characters and events, became from time to time the subjects of Irish poems, which were widely diffused and preserved, partly by tradition and partly also in a written form. 5th, While it is probable that from the earliest time much intercommunication passed between the adjoining coasts of the two countries, it is certain that at later periods within the range of history, migrations took place from Ireland to Scotland, by which the learning and enlightenment of the sister island were conveyed to the Scottish shores, and in progress of time the poetry also of Ireland became current in Scotland, and was diffused in the Scottish Highlands by recitation, but latterly also was preserved in manuscript, as in the case of the Lismore MS. already noticed. 6th, At an early period, within the records of history, whether from native character or from Irish instruction, the resident ecclesiastics of Scotland attained to eminence in learning and piety, and in all probability a considerable degree both of genius and of taste pervaded the Scottish Celts, though the evidence of any Scottish compositions of an ancient date is extremely defective, nor does any body of ancient Celtic manuscripts exist in Scotland, while those which have been preserved in Ireland are numerous, and reach at least to the XIIth century. 7th, The poems published by Macpherson as the compositions of Ossian, whether in their English or their Gaelic form, are not genuine compositions as they stand, and are not entitled to any weight or authority in themselves, being partly fictitious, but partly at the same time and to a considerable extent, copies or adaptations of Ossianic poetry current in the Highlands, and which also for the most part is well known in Ireland, and is preserved there in ancient manuscripts. 8th, Upon fairly weighing the evidence, I feel bound to express my opinion that the Ossianic poems, so far as original, ought to be considered generally as Irish compositions relating to Irish personages, real or imaginary, and to Irish events, historical or legendary ; but they indicate, also, a free communication between the two

countries, and may be legitimately regarded by the Scottish Celts as a literature in which they have a direct interest, written in their ancient tongue, recording traditions common to the Gaelic tribes, and having been long preserved and diffused in the Scottish Highlands, while if the date, or first commencement of any of these compositions, is of great antiquity, they belong as much to the ancestors of the Scottish as of the Irish Celts. 9th, There is still room for inquiry whether in the Scottish manuscript already adverted to, or in other trustworthy sources, poetry of an Ossianic character cannot be pointed out which may be peculiar to Scotland, and of which no trace may be found either in Irish manuscripts or Irish tradition. Even in the later history of the Highlands there has been no want of poetical genius, and it would be wonderful if at former and happier periods the flame did not burn with yet a brighter lustre.

I shall conclude these imperfect remarks by two special considerations, that seem to me to deserve attention.—1. I think that, with all his errors, we owe to James Macpherson a large debt of national and literary gratitude. It is difficult now to estimate precisely the degree of blame imputable to his conduct. Literary forgery and literary embellishment was then so frequent as to be almost fashionable. A faithful editor was scarcely to be found. While Chatterton fabricated literary antiquities wholesale, Percy also brushed up his ballads that he might suit them to the public taste; and even the excellent Lord Hailes was found clipping the coin which he should have uttered in its original integrity. Celtic antiquities were little understood, and antiquarian or historical criticism was only in its infancy. Macpherson obviously admired the compositions which he actually met with in the Highlands: he saw their capabilities, and he put them forward in a captivating dress. If he varied, garbled, or interpolated them, so as to exalt the country in which he found them, and to which he himself belonged, some indulgence is due to a feeling of patriotism and a desire to raise the Scottish Highlands from the depressed condition to which they had been then reduced. Perhaps he believed that Ossian was a Scottish hero and bard, that the Irish people were a mere Scottish colony, and that anything to the contrary was a modern corruption; and if his subsequent conduct was more seriously culpable,

it may be traced as much to pride and pertinacity as to want of principle. Certain it is that Macpherson was the first who saw and showed us the merits of Gaelic poetry. Assuming these poems, so far as genuine, to be Irish compositions, they had been neglected by the Irish, and allowed to remain unpublished and unknown, until Macpherson brought them to light from Scottish sources. Then, no doubt, a variety of Irish writers came forward and asserted their claims. Miss Brooke, Walker, Hardiman, Drummond, O'Reilly, and other more recent writers, have done justice to their subject and to the genius of Ireland: but it should not be forgotten that it was the Scottish Ossian that drew them forth; and, indeed, the Irish of the present day are not slow to ackowledge the superior zeal with which the Albanian Celts have brought out and disseminated the compositions of the common language.

2. I take the occasion of connecting with this subject an earnest exhortation, which I address to myself as well as to others, to give a prominent place to the Celtic languages in the study of philology. Of all countries in the world, Britain is the one which is under the strongest call and obligation to extend philological science. Our possessions are to be found in all of the four quarters of the globe, and in that fifth division of it, which is presented by the Southern seas. Our commerce is still more extended than our colonies, and the noble character of our missionary enterprises rivals or even excels the far-famed Propaganda of Rome herself. "The Bible of every land" shows what Britain has already done in this field, and gives good promise of what she may yet do. Nor are we deficient practically in philological talent. We have produced some of the greatest scholars that ever distinguished themselves in classical learning. We are now successfully studying what we too long neglected, the science of our own vernacular tongue, of which the composite elements connect us with half the languages in Europe. Next to the classical languages, the most important and the most marvellous among the monuments of human speech, the sacred language of India, had its ancient seat and still preserves its memory and its remains within dominions which are now the property of an English mercantile company. Why, then, should we neglect those other venerable languages, the two divisions of Celtic speech which are still to be found living among us, and which have such strong and natural

claims upon our attention? They are not barbarous or illiterate forms of utterance: yet, strange to say, the Irish and the Welsh have hitherto been almost entirely neglected by English philologers. The study of them has been left exclusively to Welsh and to Irish scholars, or to Scottish Highlanders possessing often little acquaintance with general philology, a state of things which could hardly be satisfactory. It is certain that no man ever understands his own language who does not also understand others. It is only by comparison that scientific principle is evolved. The mere Celtic student will never know the principles or analogies of his own tongue, which have been derived and drawn from distant and hidden sources. Better times, however, are before us. Some of our Celtic scholars of the present day are deeply versed in the whole range of the science, while philologers who are not Celts are lending their useful aid. Accordingly, the Celtic languages have found their proper place as branches of the great stock, which has spread its shoots in such wonderful variety, and yet with such remarkable features of resemblance, over the whole range of Asia and Europe, from Himalaya to Hecla. The Celtic languages, there can be no doubt, will richly repay the attention of the most fastidious linguist, and will give and receive important illustrations when studied in connection with the other members of that mighty family. It may be one of the best uses of meetings like those annually held by the Archaeological Institute, to break down the partitions that shut up men within the limited bounds of special pursuits, and to encourage them to cultivate in this, as in other departments, a more comprehensive and catholic field of inquiry.