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*