

Forgery, creation or reinvention? Compare the imagined pasts portrayed in James Macpherson's *Ossian* and the work of Iolo Morganwg.

James Macpherson (1736–1796) and Edward Williams, more widely known as Iolo Morganwg (1747–1826), were influential figures of the eighteenth-century Romantic movement and the Celtic revival in Scotland and Wales, respectively. Both produced literature within the framework of a centuries-old tradition and used this framework — real or imagined — to claim cultural primacy and establish an unbroken lineage to Britain's distant past. Macpherson asserted that he had collected primarily oral material in Scottish Gaelic from the Highlands and translated it into *The Poems of Ossian*. Despite initial and ongoing controversy over its authenticity, the work proved highly successful both in Britain and abroad. The current consensus is that Macpherson wrote the majority of the poems himself, drawing heavily on genuine Gaelic sources.¹ Iolo produced and translated many poems over the course of his lifetime, and wrote extensively about *Barddas*, or “Bardism”, the Welsh bardic tradition that he claimed to be a direct continuation of pre-Roman Druidic practices. His work was accepted at face value for many years, but it was later revealed that many of the poems and triads he attributed to medieval authors, such as Dafydd ap Gwilym, were in fact his own compositions, and most of his writing on ancient Bardism was fabricated. Despite these forgeries, Iolo's legacy endures in modern culture through the traditions of *Gorsedd Cymru* and the National Eisteddfod of Wales.² The aim of this essay is to compare the different visions of the Celtic past presented by both writers and to

¹ Micheál Mac Craith, 'The Forging of Ossian,' in *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown, (BRILL, 1996), pp. 132–138.

² Mary-Ann Constantine, 'Songs and Stones: Iolo Morganwg (1747-1826), Mason and Bard', *Eighteenth Century: Theory & Interpretation*, 47.2/3 (July 2006) 233–51, p. 233. EBSCOhost
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assess whether their work constitutes forgery, creative invention, or a purposeful reinvention of their cultural identities.

The second half of the eighteenth century saw the rise of Romanticism throughout Europe as an energetic counterpoint to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Reacting in part to the societal changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, Romantic thinkers found beauty in the wilderness and sought refuge in the distant past. The pioneering German neoclassicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann wrote in 1764, 'There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean, by imitating the ancients (sic)'.³ The Romantics shared this impulse, but rejected the empiricist ideals of classical antiquity in favour of a utopian and often nationalistic primitivism that also had its origins in the Renaissance.⁴ Civilized society — through modernization, literacy, and social displacement — had, they believed, stripped itself of innocence and lost a purity of emotion that could only be found in ancient custom and pastoral settings: a strand of thought closely linked to the problematic stereotype of the 'noble savage'. On the so-called 'Celtic Fringe' of Europe — encompassing Ireland, Scotland, and Wales as well as Brittany and Cornwall — the Celtic Revival took place as part of this broader movement in response to contemporary questions of national identity faced by the peoples of Britain and Ireland.⁵ To understand how writers of the time envisioned their past, and by extension their present and future, it is essential to recognize that this early revival was not a unified pan-Celtic movement. The poets of Ireland and Wales saw little commonality between their languages and ancient material, and their relationships with Scottish writers became increasingly strained

³ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the painting and sculpture of the Greeks*, trans. by Henry Fuseli (London: A Millar, 1765), p. 2.

⁴ Josep Leerson, *National Thought in Europe : A Cultural History*, 1st edn. (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p. 36; Philip Connell, 'British Identities and the Politics of Ancient Poetry in Later Eighteenth-Century England', *The Historical Journal*, 49.1 (2006), 161–92 (pp. 161–165).

⁵ Josep Leerssen, 'Celticism', in *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown, (BRILL, 1996), pp. 4–5.

during the period.⁶ Despite this rivalry, all three cultures shared a reverence for the idealized figure of the bard as a custodian of ancient wisdom and champion of the national spirit.

The publication of 'the poems of Ossian' by Macpherson in the early 1760s brought the image of the ancient bard to the forefront of the popular imagination; however, the reinvention of the Celtic archetype owes much to Thomas Gray's earlier poem, *The Bard. A Pindaric Ode* (1757).⁷ Gray's bard, 'robed in the sable garb of woe', long-bearded with 'haggard eyes' and 'hoary hair',⁸ decries the ravaging of Wales by successive English rulers before plunging to his death from the cliffs above the River Conwy. This potent symbol of loss and defiance ignited a surge of antiquarian and folkloric interest in Britain's Celtic past. Gray, a keen scholar, drew upon Welsh sources and even attempted to echo something of Welsh bardic *cynghanedd* in lines such as 'Weave the warp, and weave the woof';⁹ however, he made no pretensions to having "discovered" ancient material, though he did perpetuate the historical fallacy that Edward I ordered all bards in Wales to be put to death. In embellishing the figure of Ossian — based on the Oisín of the Irish Fenian Cycle — Macpherson firmly rooted the ultimate source of Gray's archetype in the Scottish Highlands, much to the immediate chagrin of Irish scholars and later reaction of Welsh ones. By presenting his epic in the distant past, Macpherson also rendered Scottish Celticism more relatable to non-Gaelic audiences compared with the nationalistic overtones of Gray's bard.¹⁰ The effects of "Ossianism" were felt widely throughout the English literati, and Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) was produced, at least in

⁶ Mary-Ann Constantine, *The Truth Against the World: Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 90; Micheál Mac Craith, "We know all these poems': The Irish Response to Ossian", in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, 1st edn., ed. by Howard Gaskill (Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), p. 92.

⁷ Edward Douglas Snyder, *The Celtic revival in English literature, 1760-1800* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1923) p. 41.

⁸ Ibid. p. 46.

⁹ Ibid. p. 39.

¹⁰ Connell, 'British Identities and the Politics of Ancient Poetry', pp. 163-164.

part, as an 'answering defence of English literary antiquity'.¹¹ Those seeking to uphold the Saxons and Danes as the perfect model for ancient civilization recognized the appeal of the Celtic bard and created their own scops and skalds to support this vision.

Writing several decades later against the background of the Ossian controversy, Iolo Morganwg devoted much of his energy to defending the primacy of the Welsh bard and the authenticity of the Welsh tradition. In contrast to Ossian's 'misty orality',¹² Iolo drew on a far more extensive manuscript tradition to support his views. He used the existence of this tradition to denigrate Scots Gaelic for its lack of written sources, echoing arguments employed by English critics years earlier.¹³ In an unpublished draft titled 'A Short Account of the Ancient British Bards' (1795), Iolo writes:

The genuine succession of the Ancient British Bards is not yet quite extinct in Wales, but nearly so. They maintain that their institution originated in Britain, and tho' it was imitated by other nations, as the Gauls, Irish, and others, yet it was not adopted by them in its primitive simplicity and purity, but that they blended with it their own absurd customs and superstitions, by which means it soon degenerated from its primitive excellence, and the Bards deemed it the most excellent institution that ever appeared in the world.¹⁴

Here, again, we find the notion of 'primitive simplicity' that defines much of Ossianism; however, Iolo's vision of the Welsh past is at once both more primitive and more refined than that of Ossian. Whereas Macpherson implied that contact with the Roman Empire was a corrupting force — one from which the Iron Age Highlanders had supposedly remained

¹¹ Ibid. p. 164.

¹² Constantine, *The Truth Against the World*, p. 112.

¹³ Ibid. p. 97–98, 112

¹⁴ Iolo Morganwg, *A Short Account of the Ancient British Bards*

<[https://iolomorganwg.wales.ac.uk/gwaith-shortaccount.php#tud-\(239\)](https://iolomorganwg.wales.ac.uk/gwaith-shortaccount.php#tud-(239))> [accessed 4 May 2025]

free — Iolo saw the Romanization of the Ancient Britons, who had long been equated with the Welsh in British historiography, as central to the Welsh identity.¹⁵ In Iolo's imagination, it was during the Roman occupation that Classical Druidism developed into British Bardism and embraced Roman Christianity earlier than either the Gaels or Saxons.¹⁶ Through this civilizing influence, Bardism had survived in Wales into his own time. This seems contradictory at first glance, but when we consider the long-accepted legendary Trojan origin of the Ancient Britons — and, by extension, the Welsh — we see how Iolo's conception of the bard distills the best of both primitive idealism and classical antiquity. By combining the Northern druid with the Greek philosopher and Christian scholar, Iolo creates an origin myth that stands above rival constructions of the archetypal "native" poet.

Despite being a work of primitivism, it would be misleading to characterize Macpherson's verse as simplistic; Robert Crawford observes that 'Gaelic tradition did have an Ossian, and there were Irish accounts of Finn, but these were not quasi-Homeric epic poems. Macpherson collected oral and some written materials which he embellished in full-blown Belles Lettres style'.¹⁷ *The Poems of Ossian* had broad influence on both the Romantic and the Neoclassical movement. During Colma's lament in 'The Songs of Selma' (1762), we encounter an elegiac tone reminiscent of Classical and Homeric literature that encapsulates much of *Ossian*:

Who lie on the heath beside me? Are they my love and my brother?

Speak to me, O my friends! To Colma they give no reply. Speak to me:

I am alone! My soul is tormented with fears! Ah! they are dead!

¹⁵ Constantine, *The Truth Against the World*, pp. 102-103.

¹⁶ Iolo Morganwg and William Owen Pugh, 'Bardism', in *The Heroic Elegies of Llywarc Hen* (London: J. Owen and E. Williams, 1792), p. xxxii, lix–lx.

¹⁷ Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books: A History of Scottish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 311.

Their swords are red from the fight. O my brother! my brother! why
hast thou slain my Salgar? why, O Salgar! hast thou slain my brother?¹⁸

Macpherson's disregard for the form and metre of traditional Gaelic verse angered his critics, yet it also elevated his vision of the Celtic past to the same level as Greece and Rome in the minds of his metropolitan and international audience.¹⁹ *Ossian* transformed Celtic mythology into a primitivist ideal perfectly suited to eighteenth-century tastes. Fiona Stafford notes that, 'the warriors depicted are already dead before the poems open, and live only in the memories of the widows and old men. The martial culture, reminiscent of Homer or Virgil, is thus idealised but contained in the past.'²⁰ This reinforced the noble Highland savage as something exotic and other, and it assured non-Highland readers that any barbarism — or lingering Jacobitism — was now safely contained by the forces of civilization.

Iolo's past was something that could be interacted with directly through Bardism, which he presented as an unbroken link to Ancient Britain. Having seen how the oral transmission of Macpherson's Ossianic material left itself open to criticism by literary establishment figures such as Samuel Johnson, Iolo sought to defend his own oral material against such criticism by inventing a history of 'Bardic Traditions' to preserve it.²¹ His material, he claimed, was transmitted through 'Didactic Songs and Aphorisms' that were discussed and scrutinized at every meeting of bards: 'This being the practice, it was impossible for perversion and interpolation to take place, every thing of this kind would be soon detected and rejected...it was impossible for them to deviate materially from Truth'.²² Despite his assertion of an ironclad oral transmission,

¹⁸ James Macpherson and Hugh Blair, *The Poems of Ossian with Dissertation's on the Poems and Era of Ossian; and Dr Blair's Critical Dissertation* (London: Scott, Webster & Geary, 1835), pp. 236–237.

¹⁹ Fiona Stafford, 'Primitivism and the 'Primitive' Poet: A Cultural Context for Macpherson's Ossian', in *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown, (BRILL, 1996), p. 92.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Iolo Morganwg and William Owen Pugh, 'Bardism', in *The Heroic Elegies of Llywarc Hen* (London: J. Owen and E. Williams, 1792), pp. xxxiv–xxxvi.

²² Iolo Morganwg, *An extract from an essay on Bardic Tradition, published in 1795 by*

Iolo was preoccupied with the possibility of pre-Roman literacy among the Britons. He created a Bardic alphabet along with a system for 'hewing verse' onto wooden staves, which he claimed had been used by the ancient Druids.²³ Crucially, Iolo believed that Welsh was a pristine language that had been spoken by the Ancient Britons and had resisted outside influence throughout its history;²⁴ therefore, if he could furnish Welsh with a pre-Roman alphabet, he could argue that any concept or vocabulary it contained predated contact with the Romans. By this leap of logic, Iolo presented the direct ancestors of the Welsh as a complex, indigenous civilization whom the Romans, at best, merely added to.²⁵

Almost two centuries after the publication of *The Poems of Ossian*, J. R. R. Tolkien remarked of the setting for his stories: 'Middle-earth is *our* world...I have (of course) placed the action in a purely imaginary (though not wholly impossible) period of antiquity'.²⁶ In the context of the eighteenth century, it is unlikely that readers would have accepted Tolkien's position at face value; the relationship between national identity and historical narrative was highly volatile,²⁷ and the concepts of modern literature and historicity were still in their infancy. Stafford argues: 'Macpherson's Ossian is not a straightforward case of deliberate deception, nor indeed of cultural imperialism, because of the peculiar value placed on the 'epic' and on 'ancient poetry' in eighteenth-century universities'.²⁸ While it is true that Macpherson invented a great deal of *Ossian* himself, he also reimagined Gaelic material through the lens of Enlightenment

Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg),

<https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/250097/mod_resource/content/1/Short%20extract%20for%20discussion%20on%20Friday%205th%20April.pdf> [accessed 7 May 2025]

²³ Constantine, *The Truth Against the World*, pp. 105–111.

²⁴ Iolo Morganwg and William Owen Pugh, 'Bardism', in *The Heroic Elegies of Llywarch Hen* (London: J. Owen and E. Williams, 1792), pp. xxiii–xxiv

²⁵ Constantine, *The Truth Against the World*, pp. 107–108.

²⁶ Humphrey Carpenter, J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography (London: Unwin, 1987), p. 98.

²⁷ Connell, 'British Identities and the Politics of Ancient Poetry', p. 192.

²⁸ Stafford, 'Primitivism and the 'Primitive' Poet, p. 93.

ideals. Though *Ossian's* themes are predominantly those of loss and decline, the work itself sparked a revival, greatly stimulating Gaelic literature and cultural output.²⁹

Iolo was undoubtedly a forger, but he was also a radical thinker deeply immersed in his subject. His deceptions went unexamined for much longer partly because he was a genuine expert on Welsh poetry and understood its traditional forms. His writings on Bardism were accepted at face value because they satisfied a powerful cultural desire to reimagine Welsh national identity in relation to a heroic past. Whereas Macpherson's imagined past was something to be exoticized and enjoyed from a distance, Iolo's was something in which one could actively participate. Although Iolo's work has largely faded from view in modern Romantic studies,³⁰ his reinvention of Druidic ritual continues to be practised widely around the world. The different pasts constructed by both writers reflect not only their own cultural aspirations, but the passions and insecurities of their age. While each embellished or outright fabricated the past, they nonetheless contributed to scholarship that preserved their areas of interest and left enduring legacies that continue to shape present-day narratives.

²⁹ Donald E. Meek, 'The Sublime Gael: The Impact of Macpherson's *Ossian* on Literary Creativity and Cultural Perception in Gaelic Scotland', in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, 1st edn., ed. by Howard Gaskill (Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), p. 43.

³⁰ Constantine, 'Songs and Stones', p. 233.

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