

Some Key Texts of the Celtic Revival: a Brief Guide

Macpherson, James. *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*. Edited by Howard Gaskill. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

Based on the influential edition of 1765, this is an extremely useful edition of the many texts that made up the “Ossian phenomenon,” starting with the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* in 1760 and including *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* by Macpherson’s mentor Hugh Blair (New York: Garland, 1970). Includes a very good and succinct introduction by Fiona Stafford.

Thomas Gray Archive: <http://www.thomasgray.org>

Gray’s “The Bard,” which dramatizes the (apocryphal) story of the massacre of the Welsh bards by Edward I, was a central text in the literature of the bardic revival. It was much imitated, often translated, and responsible for kick-starting an entire tourist industry in the North Welsh landscape where it is set. This excellent online resource allows the reader access to fully annotated texts of all Gray’s works, as well as to contextual material and a full bibliography of secondary literature.

Owen, William. *The Heroic Elegies and Other Pieces of Llywarc Hen*. London: J. Owen and E. Williams, 1792.

This otherwise unremarkable collection of translations of early medieval Welsh poetry, by the London Welshman William Owen, is prefaced by a lengthy introduction, much of it authored anonymously by the Welsh bard and stonemason Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg). It sets out in detail his fabricated vision of the Ancient British bardic order, including its history, rituals, and cosmology.

Percy, Thomas. *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. 3 vols. London: Routledge, 1996.

A lovely facsimile of the first edition (London: Dodsley, 1765) of this seminal collection of poems, songs, and ballads, with a critical introduction by Nick Groom. Percy developed his notion of the English “minstrel” in the *Reliques*, which became an inspirational text across Europe.

Brooke, Charlotte. *Reliques of Irish Poetry*. Edited by Lesa Ní Mhunghaile. Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2009.

An important collection that pays homage to Percy’s *Reliques* (1765) but also presents several poems whose heroes (such as Oisín himself) have their Ossianic counterparts. Brooke saw her translations from Gaelic not as potential material for forging a separatist cultural nationalism but rather as mediations: “sweet ambassadors of cordial union” (p. vii). This edition includes new translations and analyses of the Irish material by Lesa Ní Mhunghaile. Originally published in 1789.

Evans, Evan. *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards*. London: Dodsley, 1764.

Conceived as a response to Macpherson’s *Ossian*, this selection of medieval Welsh poems is a work of painstaking scholarship and includes sections in English, Welsh, and Latin. Evans (who also corresponded with Thomas Percy) provided information for Thomas Gray as he wrote “The Bard” (1757).

Herder, Johann Gottfried. “Extract from Correspondence on Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples, 1773.” Translated by Joyce P. Crick. In *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought*. Edited by David Simpson, 71–76. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Written in 1771, this is a formative essay in the history of romantic nationalism and the study of folklore. It reveals the young Herder’s enthusiastic response to the *Ossian* poems (which he had only

read partially, in a review), finding in them the distinctive “voice of the people.” Originally published as “Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker” in *Sämtliche Werke* (ed. Bernhard Suphan, Berlin: Weidmann’sche Buchhandlung, 1877–1913; Vol. 5, pp. 159–207).

La Villemarqué, Théodore Hersart de. Barzaz Breiz: Chants populaires de la Bretagne. Paris: Perrin, 1963.

This collection of Breton songs and ballads, with French translations, was first published in 1839 but was considerably expanded in 1845 and 1867. It became the subject of an Ossian-style controversy when it emerged that the author had “improved” the folk tradition to fit a more Celtic and romantic view of the country’s history.