

DAFYDD MOORE

JAMES MACPHERSON AND ADAM FERGUSON: AN ENLIGHTENMENT ENCOUNTER

Recent years have established a critical consensus which holds that James Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian* did not emerge from the Highland mists fully formed and unprompted, but that leading members of the Scottish Enlightenment provided 'the inspiration, incentive, financial support, letters of introduction, editorial assistance, publishing connections, and emotional encouragement that brought Ossian into print'.¹ The widespread acceptance of this position (first mooted seriously by Thomas Bailey Saunders in his *Life and Letters of James Macpherson* in 1894) has in turn led scholars to direct their attention to the question of why the likes of Hugh Blair, Adam Ferguson and (at least until 1765) David Hume exerted themselves in this way, and how *Ossian* might reflect the ongoing agendas of the Scottish *literati*.² Much of this work is fine and valuable, yet also strangely unsatisfactory. In the words of John Dwyer:

The Poems of Ossian have been recruited to support cultural explanations of the development of Scottish society, the programme of the Edinburgh literati, and the need to incorporate the Highlands within a modern Scottish nation. There is nothing intrinsically invalid about such approaches, but they do tend to relieve scholars from the task of actually reading and analysing the textual source.³

Howard Gaskill has been more scathing in his analysis of a critical tradition which has consistently ignored its supposed subject matter. With justification he speaks of the 'remarkable degree of unreliability, indeed downright shoddiness, about so much that has appeared in print on Macpherson', lamenting a tendency amongst even 'otherwise perceptive critics' which has only served 'to perpetuate long-standing prejudice and also tarnish their genuine insights'.⁴

Providing a fully contextualised account of *The Poems of Ossian* which stays faithful to a reading experience is beyond the scope of this article. However, a limited test-case is offered here in a consideration of some of the issues thrown up by a comparison of *Ossian* with relation to the social thought of Adam Ferguson. The aim is to make a contribution to current Macpherson re-evaluation, and at the same time to advocate a slightly novel approach to such revisionist endeavours by paying close attention to *Ossian* itself. Luke Gibbons has recently observed that Ferguson's 'complex intellectual fusion of primitivism and progress is an abiding presence in Macpherson's work', a comment that I aim here to unpack a little further with a consideration of some of the issues raised in Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil*

Society (1767).⁵ The immediate objection that *Ossian* predates the publication of the *Essay* can be countered in two ways. Firstly, it is not my intention to claim any direct link between the output of the two men, merely to examine how these works reflect on each other and to suggest interesting similarities and differences between work arising from a similar cultural and intellectual *milieu*. Secondly, although not published until 1767, the *Essay* existed in manuscript form (provisionally entitled 'A Treatise on Refinement') as early as 1759, when Ferguson offered it to David Hume for his perusal and comments.⁶

Certainly Ferguson was intimate with the production of *Ossian*. Hugh Blair reported to the Highland Society investigation into Macpherson's activities that as he himself was 'entirely ignorant of the Gaelic language' he relied on the opinion of Ferguson, amongst others, with regards to the faithfulness of Macpherson's translations. Ferguson had, according to Blair, seen 'old manuscripts' and that 'in comparing [Macpherson's] version with the original, they [Ferguson and others] found it exact and faithful, in any parts which they read'.⁷ Ferguson's own testimony bears this out, and he willingly admits that at the early stages he was 'far from apprehending any imposture' even going as far as to recognise a passage as similar to one he himself had taken down from a Gaelic source in 1740. Having read the finished product, Ferguson revised his opinion, believing that there had been certain 'liberties taken in piecing together what was found in separate or broken fragments'.⁸ That notwithstanding, the degree to which Blair and Ferguson had a direct hand in shaping *Ossian* is a matter for dispute, with the situation not being as clear-cut as those who have ritually denigrated Macpherson would have us believe.⁹ Certainly some of *Ossian*'s most vitriolic critics of the 1770s and 1780s had no doubt about Ferguson's involvement at a significant level: in an era when it was a widespread belief among English writers that 'the Scots constituted a conspiracy or a cabal to advance their own interests at the expense of all others, and, if need be, [...]of the truth itself' it was insupportable that such men as Ferguson could have been the innocent victims of a 'hoax'.¹⁰

A striking aspect of the testimonies offered to the Highland Society is that, while most of the statements in the report paint an unflattering picture of the now deceased Macpherson (Blair defends him from the charge of being a fraud on the grounds that he was too 'proud, high-spirited, and disdainful' to carry off such a ruse), Ferguson would appear to have held a relatively high opinion of his fellow Highlander. Indeed relations between the men seem to have remained more than cordial until the death of Macpherson, if correspondence between the two on the subject of a Gaelic *Ossian* as late as 1793 is anything to go on.¹¹ In 1781, and at the height of the Percy affair, Ferguson might have been telling Blair that he thought *Ossian* to be a 'matter of some curiosity in the history of mankind, but very little as matter of vanity to one corner of this island, much less of jealousy to any other corner of it',

but to the Highland Society Committee in 1798 his tone is somewhat different.¹² He lauds the ‘genius, learning, and courage of James Macpherson’ in championing a literature whose ‘greatest elegancies were to be learned from herdsmen or deer-stealers [sic]’ in a language which was ‘connected with disaffection, and proscribed by government’.¹³ Furthermore he repeats the reasoning of supporters of *Ossian* in enlisting the precedent of Homer to justify Macpherson’s compilational style (a line of argument which in itself served to infuriate English literary critics at a time when the struggle for a dominant cultural meta-narrative centred around the ‘image’ of cultural icons such as Homer’s works, and which helps to account for their stubborn insistence that Macpherson *entirely* fabricated *Ossian*¹⁴). Ferguson’s generally common-sense attitude to Macpherson’s work seems to be summarised in a letter to Bishop Douglas in September 1781, where he declares that ‘the Specimens I have seen apart from the curiosity of them are very interesting as Efforts of the Imagination and the heart equal to any Poetry I know, and whether genuine or spurious I shall never be ashamed of having mistaken them for Originals’.¹⁵

It is notable that this admiration for Macpherson seems to revolve around the service (at least in Ferguson’s opinion) done by Macpherson to Gaelic culture. Ferguson, like Macpherson, was a Gaelic-speaking Highlander. Indeed, it has subsequently become a commonplace to ascribe Ferguson’s particular take on the issues central to the Scottish thinkers of his time at least in part to his upbringing on the Highland Line. Duncan Forbes, for example, suggests that Ferguson ‘knew intimately, and from the inside, the two civilisations which divided eighteenth century Scotland: the *Gemeinschaft* of the clan, belonging to the past, the *Gesellschaft* of the “progressive”, commercial Lowlands’.¹⁶ It is this inside angle that, for Forbes, spells the difference between, say, Ferguson and Adam Smith. Where the latter knows ‘only the external bonds of the clan system’, the author of the *Essay* ‘knew the inner bonds, the loyalty to the clan and to the chief who was the symbol of its unity’ (*ibid.*, p. xxxix), speaking the ideology of the clan as he criticised it. Of course, things are rarely that simple: Ferguson was not a clansman in the way that Macpherson was; and, more generally, we ought to beware stressing too forcefully this idea of the stagnated and backward-looking Highlands, an image which served (and serves) a number of ideological purposes beyond the remit of this article.¹⁷ Equally, it should be noted that Ferguson makes few explicit references to the Highlands. While Ferguson’s frequent use of the word ‘clan’ most immediately calls to mind those of Scotland, we should be aware of other eighteenth century applications: the Oxford English Dictionary cites four examples, pre-1732, of its use ‘extended to similar groups in other countries’ (including in Douglas’ *Aeneid*).¹⁸ It is generally accepted, however, that the Highlands loom large in the background thinking of the *Essay*. Forbes, amongst others, has not surprisingly suggested that the Highlands take their place in the work, albeit ‘clothed in the fashionable garb’ of Ancient

Sparta and the Native American tribe. He cites the passage where Ferguson follows the visit of an imaginary traveller to an ancient Greek city. The visitor is appalled by the conditions, 'many features of which,' according to Forbes, 'incidentally have an obvious resemblance and conscious or unconscious reference to the Highlands of Scotland'.¹⁹ However, steering clear of such deep waters (as I aim to do throughout), it seems safe to say that, from his opinion of *Ossian* at least, Ferguson appears to demonstrate both the affinity to Gaelic culture and the condescension towards it that characterises Macpherson's own work: Ferguson understands the difficulty of the Gael in the 1750s while still characterising him as a 'deer-steeler'.

Bearing in mind the caveats entered above, the following discussion centres around the concern of Macpherson and Ferguson with (perceived) primitive cultures. Such a concern makes for a recurrent theme in their work, albeit one which reveals a potential for conflicting stances. This can be (at least in part) contextualised by reference to the differing Highland heritage of the men, and charting some of these differences through the evidence of their texts might offer a warning against easy determinism with regards to *Ossian*, its place within the Scottish Enlightenment canon, and to the Highland experience of the eighteenth century. In tracing similarities between the men, the central claim of my argument will be that while Macpherson's prose discussions out-do Ferguson in the "primitivist" stakes, his poetic output is characterised by – and often out-strips – the ambivalence inherent within Ferguson towards a past of noble savagery.

II.

Macpherson and Ferguson forcefully create images of a primitive *noblesse oblige* as a participatory structure of social value and action which chime in detail with each other. The relationship between early tribal leaders and their followers was a fluid one, Ferguson suggests, where the chief was seen as a 'common bond of connection', not the 'common master'.²⁰ He has the tribe's support on account of both taking the 'principal share in their troubles' (p. 99) and by doing nothing to earn their resentment (p. 123): the crucial point being that the relationship is a voluntary one, and the system is self-regulatory:

The sovereign wishes to give stability and order to administration, by express and promulgated rules. The subject wishes to know the conditions and limits of his duty. He acquiesces, or he revolts, according as the terms [...] are, or are not, consistent with his sense of his rights.

(pp. 158–9)

In Macpherson's recreation of very early Caledonian society we see a similar balance in the behaviour of the druids who, mindful 'of preserving their character of sanctity [...] so essential to their influence' took care 'that they never broke out into violence or oppression'.²¹ According to Macpherson the

druids eventually lost power and became marginalised after failing to observe this principle, but the systems which followed (the kingship of the line of Fingal and subsequently clanship) restored and observed it: in later society the chief whose commands were 'absolute and decisive' did not abuse that power in a relationship which more closely resembled that of the family than the "modern" political state. In a note to *Temora* VI Macpherson goes further in describing the nature of Highland society (although not explicitly sign posted we feel that the historical focus has shifted closer to our time). 'It is', he suggests, 'a vulgar error, that the common Highlanders lived, in abject slavery, under their chiefs'.²² He explains:

When the honour of the tribe was concerned, the commands of the chief were obeyed, without restriction: but, if individuals were oppressed, they threw themselves into the arms of a neighbouring clan, assumed a new name, and were encouraged and protected. The fear of this desertion, no doubt, made the chiefs cautious in their government. As their consequence, in the eyes of others, was in proportion to the number of their people, they took care to avoid every thing that tended to diminish it. (p. 511)

It is worth noting in passing that this vision of a Highland past went beyond theory and wishful-thinking on Macpherson's part, and that in later life he took practical steps to turn back the clock to this time (which may or may not have ever existed). James turned down the offer (for political services rendered) of the clan lands confiscated from his uncle, the Jacobite Ewan Macpherson of Cluny, requesting their return to the rightful heir. When Macpherson did retire to live the life of the Highland laird, it was very much that of the beneficent and kindly patriarch – living in a kind of 'rural magnificence' at 'a distance from the seat of government' (p. 213) – that he nostalgically evokes in his dissertation.²³

The idea of self-regulation also surfaces in both writer's accounts of early legal systems. Macpherson stresses that civil affairs were governed not by the chief, but by the '*Clechda*, or the traditional precedents of their ancestors', while the authority of the chief merely enforced (and was reinforced by) this rule. Only in matters of war was executive authority exercised more actively by the chief:

even then he seldom extended it to the taking the life of any of his tribe. —No crime was capital, except murder; and that was very unfrequent [sic] in the highlands. [...] The memory of an affront of this sort would remain, for ages in a family, and they would seize every opportunity to be revenged. (p. 512)

For his part, Ferguson makes the same link between a primitive penal code based on the principle of revenge and inherited blood-feuds and the absence of violent crime amongst primitive societies: such 'considerations', says

Ferguson, 'render [savages] cautious and circumspect, put them on their guard against their passions, and give to their ordinary deportment an air of phlegm and composure superior to what is possessed among polished nations' (p. 86).

On the face of it, however, Macpherson has a far simpler (we might say cruder) conception of the nature of society and its development than does Ferguson. Macpherson is unable to maintain Ferguson's balance between the need for, and positive benefits of, progress, and a regret for the current absence of some noble characteristics that have been lost along the way. At times Macpherson seems conscious of this:

If we err in praising too much the times of our forefathers, it is also as repugnant to good sense, to be altogether blind to the imperfections of our own. If our fathers had not so much wealth, they had certainly fewer vices than the present age. Their tables[...]were not so well provided, neither were their beds so soft as those of modern times; and this, in the eyes of men who place their ultimate happiness in those conveniences of life, gives us a great advantage over them. (p. 36)

This careful weighting of argument is reminiscent of Ferguson, as is the placing of two times and cultures in a vital relation to each other, while at the same time acknowledging that our judgement of both may be flawed. Macpherson's second sentiment here has the easy good sense of Ferguson's own formulation that 'every age hath its consolations, as well as its suffering' (p. 104), and the final point is discerning enough to not suggest that every member of modern society shares the views Macpherson describes. Indeed, Ferguson problematises the whole nature of his enquiry with his acknowledgement of its subjective nature, even on issues traditionally seen as being as dear to the heart of the "Scottish Cato" as the question of "luxury." Put simply, although the acquisition of luxury is what drives men to act in the good of the polity, it is the effects of the once-gained luxury that Ferguson holds at least partly responsible for the corruption and eventual decline of nations. But how can we judge what counts as "luxury", asks Ferguson when human nature 'admits the reasonableness and the utility of what is already familiar; and apprehends an excess and corruption, only in the newest refinement of the rising generation' (p. 233)? His hypothetical Traveller to Greece (p. 185–8) encapsulates this complicated position: ostensibly showing us the savagery of ancient civilisation, stripped of its heroic glories, Ferguson's allusion to Swift ('I do not mean [...] to vie with the celebrated author of the voyage to Lilliput', [p. 186]) alerts us to the possibility that the Traveller's words tell us as much about his own prejudices as they do about the things he comments on.

However, it is significant that the point of Macpherson's comment even here is to praise the primitive at the expense of the modern, and it is difficult to maintain, given the barely concealed contempt within references to the softness of beds, that Macpherson's balance is anything other than ironic. In

general, the imperative to laud the rustic drowns out the potential tone of good sense within this style as exemplified by Ferguson's handling of it. For example, where Ferguson sees property as causing the advent of interest and selfishness, but also the thing that turns a man from being lazy and unable to apply himself to anything other than the passionate demands of the moment to someone able to plan for the future, see the distant returns on mundane labour, and in short to progress to a more desirable standard of life, Macpherson anathematises it. It is the advent of property that, according to Macpherson, causes society to lose its appreciation of its heritage, creating a sensibility that 'does not go back to antiquity, or look forward to succeeding ages': 'the cares of life increase, and the actions of other times no longer amuse' (p. 51). In the dissertation preceding *Temora* he reinforces this with the – for all the world self-evident – assertion that after the Romans left Britain the Britons were unable to defend themselves on account of being 'enervated by the slavery of several centuries, and those vices, which are inseparable from an advanced state of civility' (p. 212). He holds forth on this subject yet again in a lengthy footnote in *Temora* IV:

Whatever a philosopher may say, in praise of quiet and retirement, I am far from thinking, but they weaken and debase the human mind. When the faculties of the soul are not exerted, they lose their vigour, and low and circumscribed notions take the place of noble and enlarged ideas. Action, on the contrary, and the vicissitudes of fortune which attend it, call forth, by turns, all the powers of the mind, and, by exercising, strengthen them. Hence it is, that in great and opulent states, when property and indolence are secured to individuals, we seldom meet with that strength of mind, which is so common in a nation, not far advanced in civilisation. (p. 500)

While this might sound something like Ferguson's praise of a vigorous lifestyle, it is crucial to note that there is no accompanying sense here that the removal of 'vicissitudes' might not, on balance, be a good thing. Equally, we should note that Macpherson believes that there is a degree of recompense: the modern 'leisure to cultivate the mind' allows men to return 'with reflection, to a primaevial dignity of sentiment', but it is significant that this is a *return* to a nature he seems to have truly regretted the passing of (p. 211).²⁴ Ferguson, on the other hand, while he sees it a mistake and an arrogance in the modern mind to feel that primitive man has nothing desirable in him (and has some equally gloomy things to say about 'quiet and retirement') also recognises that what is good about primitive society is held on to in the teeth of the most appalling savagery, an important point to bear in mind in considering those moments when he seems to be praising the primitive way of life. The typical Ferguson movement is: 'if the savage has not received our instructions, he is likewise unacquainted with our vices' suggesting that when it comes to 'forming his sentiments, he knows all that the heart requires to be

known' (p. 178). That said, the weight of such criticism falls on our vices as being the things that make the primitive appealing and the solution is, accordingly, to reform those vices, not to become like the savage.

In short, if Oz-Salzburger is right and Ferguson's purpose is 'to reclaim the idea of civic virtue on behalf of modern commercial society' we must conclude that Macpherson is doing the reverse.²⁵ Thinking in such terms helps clear up some of the most extraordinary moments in Macpherson's theoretical framework, such as the following claim that:

the Belgae of Britain [...] were a commercial people; and commerce, we might prove, from many shining examples of our own times, is the proper inlet of arts and sciences, and all that exalts the human mind.
(p. 520)

This is the sort of flagrant contradiction which tends to leave those looking for intellectual coherence, rigour and consistency in Macpherson's work with their heads in their hands. Yet two related points should be borne in mind. Firstly, the three stage theory of development, advocated consistently by Macpherson, describes the modern age as a time where the 'complete barbarism' (to adopt Macpherson's terms) which characterised the onset of property is softened by the ability to regain through reflection a 'primeval dignity of sentiment'. Here Macpherson "merely" extends that claim to include commerce, completing an intellectual manoeuvre designed to appropriate everything good about the modern world for the Celtic past. To make such a claim is to pull the rug out from under the feet of those (including Ferguson) who would point to the recompense of advancement in exchange for that which has been lost; and of those defenders of credit politics who would claim that the values of civic humanism were irrelevant to a modern world in which commerce had replaced not the grounds for action, but the need.²⁶ In a wider sense, we are presented here with a striking example of Macpherson's attempts to refurbish Celticism in such a way as to counteract claims of primitive redundancy as a justification for cultural repression; evidence for Colin Kidd's claim that 'belief in the whig values residing in the Celtic past is consistently maintained [in Macpherson's work]'²⁷

In contrast to this hard-line stance, Ferguson's efforts are not intended to resuscitate the past in any vital way. As Peter Womack puts it: while some aspects of primitive life, particularly the 'indissoluble union of public and private commitment' represented by society before the Division of Labour, appeal to Ferguson, he cannot ultimately assent to them because they are 'embedded in an argument to the effect that the miseries of perpetual feuding outweigh the felicity of communal self-reliance'. Moreover, the very production of such insights on the primitive militate against their offering a viable alternative:

The warrior idyll remains a dream, not because the verifiable circumstances of traditional Highland life necessarily fail to confirm its details, but because it is generated within an assumption that the “separation of arts and professions” is rational and inevitable.²⁸

As Ferguson says, ‘however urged by a sense of necessity, and a desire of convenience, or favoured by any advantages of situation and policy, a people can make no great progress in cultivating the arts of life, until they have separated [...] the particular tasks, which require a peculiar skill and attention’ (p. 172). It is a tragedy that such a separation ‘in its termination, and ultimate effects, serves, in some measure, to break the bands of society’ (pp. 206–7).

III.

Yet while Macpherson’s discursive prose offers a relatively untroubled “Primitivist” interpretation of progress, the poems themselves represent this tragic (we might be tempted to say) insight of Ferguson as encapsulated in Womack’s above comment. Indeed, that comment could, with little alteration, equally well describe the represented sensibility of the Ossianic world, a world haunted by a vague sense of its own insufficiency and doom. Such a reading would see Fingal’s world as articulating a snap-shot of the moment when two societies not so much collide, as slip into one another.

Ancient Caledonia is conspicuously non-commercial, and such is the consistency with which her king and people are designated ‘of the desert’ that there appears little chance of any change:

Nor ship [...] shall Fingal take, nor land of many hills. The desert is enough to me with all its deer and woods’ (p. 101)

Similarly, Fingal’s kingdom, in common with those of all romance kings, is non-institutional, and the poems are unencumbered by any sense of the workings of state (a striking feature when we consider the previous reputation of the figure of Fionn as a giver of great laws to his people). In the heroic world, the dictates of the heart are enough and relatively simple matters are solved either through spontaneous moral sympathy, or by the sword. Furthermore, the constant threat of war amongst chronically argumentative characters ensures that state of threatened annihilation which best promotes civic virtue.

Ferguson is in close agreement with such behaviour and sentiments. For him ‘the rivalship of nations and the practice of war’ (p. 28) binds society together, and provides the ‘busiest scenes of national occupations and virtues’ (p. 29). As Ferguson puts it later, ‘intermission of national and political efforts is [...] sometimes mistaken for public good; and there is no mistake more likely to foster the vices, or flatter the weakness, of feeble and interested men’

(p. 242). In short, a nation's greatest ally is that state of affairs which threatens its destruction, and military success is in itself threatening to civic felicity. A successful military state increases in size, even if it has no ostensible imperial ambitions: it finds itself in possession of the lands of its enemies, while it also naturally looks to increase its security by pushing back its borders. Such expansionism, even if it does not result in removing healthy rivalry (to put pay to one's rivals is to open the door to the corruption and vice of inactivity) is still, according to Ferguson, self-destructive since it means that the people of the state lose their sense of belonging, and this 'tendency of enlargement to loosen the bands of political union' ultimately results in 'ages of languor, if not of decay' (p. 208). Fingal avoids this with his other-worldly refusal of Swaran's offer of reparation, only to fall into a greater trap: for Ferguson is adamant that the state needs must enlarge itself despite the potential drawbacks, and that a refusal to match the growth of our neighbours results in us becoming a 'wretched corner of [someone else's] great empire', small 'shrubs' that become 'choked by the neighbourhood of more powerful states' (p. 61). It is a powerful Catch-22, analogous to that of the Division of Labour, whereby what is essential for success sows the seeds of eventual demise.²⁹

This situation, one where Fingal avoids one cause of national malaise only to fall into another, is reflected in the strange diffuseness (a haziness to the picture created by a lack of any concrete detail), and lack of any sense of permanence in the poems. This last aspect is symbolised most strikingly in the figure of old Ossian as he shifts between the heroic past of his stories and his current plight:

Such, Fingal! were thy words; but thy words I hear no more. Sightless
I sit by thy tomb. I hear the wind in the wood; but no more I hear my
friends. The cry of the hunter is over. The voice of war is ceased.
(p. 18)

Furthermore, Fingal seems to be aware of the self-obsolescence of his ideal warrior world:

to-day our fame is greatest. We shall pass away like a dream. No sound
will be in the fields of our battles. Our tombs will be lost in the heath.
The hunter shall not know the place of our rest.

(p. 101)

As he himself suggests here and elsewhere, Fingal's time leaves no lasting monument of its existence, nothing but voices on the wind, and fragments of dimly remembered song. The Fingalian world is, in effect, stuck in limbo and lacks regenerative powers precisely because it lacks a political structure, and any sense of economic or commercial advancement. The crippling lack of space for positive action within the poems with characters held in a lyric moment of remembrance which admits no progress since progress begins a

replay of decline, can in this way be read in terms of a nightmare of the frozen moment of 'old-fashioned' civil felicity.

In short, as Ferguson tells us, those societies satisfied with the desert are doomed to wither and fail. This is reflected in the personal sphere as what Womack has memorably labelled the 'suppression of the genital', a complete lack of rejuvenating forces within poems where the erotic is unshakeably linked to death. Ossian and Malvina are, he says, 'typical [...] in being at once erotically charged and sterile, aroused by every association, the two of them wait for death', while on the whole *Ossian* posits an 'ancestral culture [...] totally incapable of transmission'.³⁰ The later poems seem to suggest in themselves the strain being felt, particularly at the moment when that most Fergusonian of men, Fingal, does the least Fergusonian of things and retires:

My son, I hear the call of years; they take my spear as they pass along.
Why does not Fingal, they seem to say, rest within his hall? Dost thou
always delight in blood? In the tears of the sad?—No: ye darkly-
rolling years, Fingal delights not in blood. Tears are wintry streams
that waste away my soul. But, when I lie down to rest, then comes the
mighty voice of war. It awakes me, in my hall, and calls forth all my
steel.—It shall call it forth no more; Ossian, take thou thy father's
spear. Lift it, in battle, when the proud arise. (p. 290)

This speech evocatively marks an acknowledgement on Fingal's part that his life's achievement has been almost entirely destructive, and he cannot lay this suspicion to rest, however hard he tries to assert that he fought for the feeble against the tyrannous. Fingal's decision to retire marks an indictment of the Fergusonian ideal model of active citizenship, and indeed a retreat from it. Yet the indictment comes with full commitment, as Ossianic history plays out the — from the Fergusonian point of view — inevitable slide into corruption and decay: fittingly, there are no tales of adventure post-dating Fingal's retirement, and Ossian's own kingship leaves nothing of value to posterity.

Yet this is not all, as the ambivalent attitude towards military adventure displayed here in Fingal's self-laceration touches on another aspect of Ferguson's thought. Ferguson's attitude to warfare strikes modern readers as alien, in as much as he sees some 'advantages' in it: for it is in the conduct of war that man can, paradoxically, express 'the most amiable qualities of [his] nature' offering 'a scene for the exercise of [his] greatest abilities' (p. 28). Man is not a peace-loving creature, and that which marks out his greatness marks him out as a warrior: 'the most respectable attributes of his nature, magnanimity, fortitude, and wisdom, carry a manifest reference to the difficulties with which he is destined to struggle' (p. 48). Yet this rhetoric of destiny stops Ferguson sounding too gung-ho, since at all the moments he advocates the vigorous lifestyle he introduces a carefully modulated tone of regret, perhaps even melancholy: he refers to the games men, like all animals, involve themselves in, games which 'anticipate, in play, the conflicts they are

doomed to sustain'. As he says, man 'was not made to live forever, and even his love of amusement has opened a path that leads to the grave' (p. 28). As Forbes puts it in his introduction to the *Essay*, for Ferguson, 'human nature in fact is like a meteor, which shines when it is in movement and as the result of friction' (p. xxix). This is also precisely the image of human endeavour found within *Ossian*.³¹

Engaged in perpetual wars, the most climactic of which began many years before the birth of the oldest participants, the Fingalians live with great valour, exhibiting 'the most respectable attributes' of the human spirit in adventuring seemingly undertaken on many occasions simply for the sake of it. Many of Ossian's stories take on the characteristics of the games Ferguson sees as typical of our (entirely healthy in his terms) obsession with active and martial virtue, and many of them have indeed 'opened a path that leads to the grave'. However, the extreme incompetence with which many of these ventures are carried out smacks of a suspicion towards, and disillusionment with, martial prowess, and the murderous cost of the world of spontaneous public virtue poses demanding questions: does conflict, by means of the values it inculcates, provide an end in itself, and if so, how great a cost can that end justify? The twilight of the Ossianic world seems suddenly aware of the emptiness of its own behaviour (exemplified by Fingal's retirement speech); the games are revealed to be serious as a romance world which supplies one young hero after another destined for an early grave gives way to a harsh sense of reality. The Fergusonian warrior idyll (which might have been a nightmare all along) declines to one blind old man living in a world which no longer has a place for his kind, a fact bemoaned but also shown to be inevitable.

This reading of *Ossian* as dramatising a Fergusonian ideal which signals its redundancy in the very act of evocation clearly bears on the work of a number of commentators who have sought to tie *Ossian* to the ongoing agendas of the Scottish Enlightenment, and I want to allude to and perhaps offer advances on the work of one particularly perceptive critic here. Adam Potkay offers stimulating readings of *Ossian* as introducing 'the heroic age of Fingal to an eighteenth century commercial society notoriously lacking in heroes'.³² The appeal and later success of the project was based on cultural wish-fulfilment, the promise to solve the 'troubling ethical dialectic of progress and civic "corruption"', which 'routinely viewed politeness and civic virtue as antithetical' (p. 122): the poems 'bridge the gap separating the emerging "feminism" of polite society from the male "chauvinism" of both the ancient polis and its modern apologists' (p. 121).

But Potkay's work suggests two areas where there is reason to see a tension in relations between Ferguson and Macpherson. Explicitly, 'the ethos of the Fingalian hero gives the lie to [the] ideal of ancient and uncorrupted masculinity' (p. 127), and he reads Macpherson's note on "Cath-Loda" lamenting the 'downright abuse of the moderns' for the female sex as a reference to the 'anti-feminist polemics' of works such as Ferguson's *Essay*

which ‘vigorously denounced the feminine ethos that threatened [the] Spartan ideal of political society’ (p. 126). Potkay is unfair to Ferguson’s sexual politics here: as the *Essay* makes careful distinction between means and ends, so in analysing Ferguson’s thinking we must take care to honour this same distinction. Before we denounce Ferguson as a misogynist we must confront his observation on those early states he admires (with qualification) that ‘the honours of one half of the species were sacrificed to those of the other’ and his conclusion that ‘we are, by this circumstance, made to remember, that no human institution is perfect’ (p. 176) – even if he does seem untroubled by such reflections. *Ossian* not so much takes issue with Ferguson as tries hard to satisfy him, trying to invest the heroic with the polite, the “feminine”, and were it successful, Ferguson would feel, we are led to suspect from reading the *Essay*, not cheated, but somewhat relieved.

Secondly, and following on from this, in examining *Ossian*’s reticence about violence, Potkay implies a further strain with Ferguson. He acutely points out that the poems are ‘stunted at precisely the point where primary epics are most expansive’, and that they present a world where ‘primeval force is advertised but concealed; paraded but veiled behind a polite aesthetic’:

Ossian’s language purposefully distracts us from the brutality it implies: the metonymic catalogue of martial accoutrements [...] is oddly depersonalised, and blood appears to burst out of no one and no where in particular (p. 124)

This ‘literal and figurative mystification of violence’ is at one with the ‘ethos of politeness’ and chimes with the militia propagandists’ (amongst whom Ferguson was prominent) need to create a sanitised version of conflict.³³ I would argue that this characteristic is in fact double-edged, that the absence of agency in the appearance of blood, for example, goes along way to creating the surreal world of *Ossian*, a world in which vulnerable characters have their life-forces spilled with a nightmarish ease. The climax to “Dar-thula” encapsulates this bewildering vision of senseless and perplexing death:

Dar-thula stood in silent grief, and beheld their fall: no tear is in her eye: but her look is wildly sad. Pale was her cheek; her trembling lips broke short an half-formed word. Her dark hair flew on the wind. —But gloomy Cairbar came. Where is thy lover now? the car-borne chief of Etha? Hast thou beheld the halls of Usnoth? Or the dark-brown hills of Fingal? My battle had roared on Morven, did not the winds meet Dar-thula. Fingal himself would have been low, and sorrow dwelling in Selma.

Her shield fell from Dar-thula’s arm, her breast of snow appeared. It appeared, but it was stained with blood for an arrow was fixed in her side. She fell on the fallen Nathos, like a wreath of snow. Her dark hair spreads on his face, and their blood is mixing round. (pp. 146–7)³⁴

Characters die beautifully, but the general vagueness denies us the recompense of heroic sacrifice, the glorious action which costs the hero(ine)'s life: all we are left with is the dying. And so "politeness" is somehow at odds with the *Essay's* martial enthusiasm: it is a moot point whether *Ossian* vindicates a marriage of civic models, or whether the very act of conveying the heroic in the polite style destroys the effectiveness of the former (certainly no general would want to fight a war on Ossianic terms), and suggests an impossibility even as it signals a unity.

These two issues meet when Potkay himself offers an objection to this utopia in his consideration of the compulsive way in which *Ossian's* stories destroy women. The answer may partly lie, as he says, in that the *Ossian* poems are 'animated at a deep level, with male resentment toward the very ideal of polite domesticity they help to formulate'; that the 'prerogatives traditionally afforded by a politics of fraternity' are recovered by 'laying adult women to rest and erecting amid their memories a heroic father figure' (p. 128). To reformulate this slightly, there is something in the mechanisms of polite society that destroys its women, that needs to destroy them. Potkay acutely stresses that 'strictly speaking [...] Fingal's actions are determined not by the dictates of morality but by the impulses of reminiscence', observing that 'beauty itself, especially the bright image of a dead women, anchors the thought and softens the rage of the ancient warrior' (p. 125). If this is so, then we must conclude that this social dynamic demands a line of dead woman to memorialise and whose memories can guide the actions of the male protagonists: this is why the Ossianic world of the "Patriot King" Fingal, the defender of the weak in arms 'excludes' (and must exclude) 'conjugal families and even mature women' (Potkay, p. 128). This carefully modulated 'ideal' polite society is then, fundamentally self-destructive, feeding on the sources of its own regeneration, and it finds its logical end in the wifeless, childless figure of *Ossian*, 'the last of his race'. In short, Potkay's perceptive analysis of a cultural moment which contains 'the sense of hanging between a neo-classical paradigm not wholly tenable and a modern ideology whose implications had yet to unfold' is exemplified but not relieved by *Ossian*, and it is not possible to assent to Potkay's formulation that 'like a Sophoclean god, *Ossian* descends to settle a seemingly insoluble tension'.³⁵ Put bluntly, rather than suggesting a utopian moment when what went wrong in the development of civil society could be put right, *Ossian*, at least in terms of its represented world, suggests that the mistake, the severing of the link between heroic past and civilised present was inevitable. In pushing to an extreme the dogma of ancient civic felicity, Macpherson's text reveals it as being as unviable in, and alien to, the modern as ever.

IV

In tracing some preliminary similarities between Macpherson and Ferguson I have inevitably set more issues in motion than I can answer in this context. By

way of summing up, and at the risk of further charges of superficiality, I am going to relate some of these issues to the Highland backgrounds of the two men and their experiences of the 1740s. As we have seen, Ferguson shares Macpherson's enthusiasm for Highland life. As he wrote:

If I had not been in the Highlands of Scotland, I might be of their mind who think the inhabitants of Paris and Versailles the only polite people in the world. It is truly wonderful to see persons of every sex and age, who have never travelled beyond the nearest mountain possess themselves perfectly [...] This is seldom seen in our cities, or in our capital; but a person among the mountains, who thinks himself nobly born, considers courtesy as the test of his rank.³⁶

Indeed, in as much as Macpherson frequently sees current Highlanders as degenerate remnants of the race of Fingal, Ferguson seems to have had a higher opinion of the current Highlanders than this younger contemporary. Of the greatest significance to a consideration of both men is the dual geographic focus of Ferguson's above comments. Both are, in a certain way, inside and outside the Gaelic realm. It is an irony that Macpherson learnt the theoretical appreciation he has for the Highland lifestyle only having, at least to some degree, stepped outside it and into the academic world in Aberdeen: it was the fruits of commercial advancement (English money, as today's more sneering critics still delight in pointing out) which allowed Macpherson to "retrieve" the culture of his homeland. Furthermore, Macpherson's later career as political fixer and essayist shows a full engagement with the forces of progress. Ferguson, the son of a Presbyterian minister who grew up on the Highland line reaches the same accommodation between cultures: admiration for an older, in some ways nobler way of life and a knowledge of the drawbacks of that culture, balance his opinions of civil society.

We have seen, however, that Macpherson's idealisation of that past was, at least on the self-consciously intellectual level of his Dissertations, less discerning and more absolute than Ferguson's. One explanation can be found in the political backgrounds of the men. Macpherson's clear-cut primitivism, and its generally blunt criticism of the modern world, seems more directly inherited from the Jacobite critique of the Hanoverian world of commerce developed over the preceding eighty or so years in a way that the Presbyterian Ferguson's characteristic mode of thought is not.³⁷ Ferguson's attitude to Jacobitism is (or ought to be) a matter for debate, and Oz-Salzberger for one suggests that 'although Jacobitism was not a political option for the likes of Ferguson, some of its emotional triggers were deeply felt even by its opponents'.³⁸ Traditionally Ferguson has been seen as an anti-Jacobite on account of his first publication, a translation of a sermon delivered in Gaelic to the Black Watch Regiment in December 1745 denouncing the Rising. However, we must be wary of surmising personal sentiments from such a professional context (especially given that the sermon was published at the

request of the Dowager Duchess of Atholl, an offer he presumably could not refuse in dangerous times). The degrees of differentiation in their attitudes to primitive societies perhaps then reflects differing degrees of adherence (neither completely absent nor fully committed but a differing balance of both) to the intellectual (if not strictly political) heritage of Jacobitism.

That Ferguson was delivering sermons in France while Macpherson was witnessing the Rising at first hand perhaps explains the other difference we have charted here. Oz-Salzberger suggests that Ferguson was 'more at home on the battlefield than in the pulpit' and that it was no coincidence that of all Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, he was to 'insist on military valour as a cornerstone of civic virtue'.³⁹ Certainly more so than Macpherson, whose Ossianic output suggests a deep distrust of military endeavour: the countless bungled and tragic tales bespeak a disillusionment with the promise of martial strength to put things right. Maybe this, and his obsession with victims, is down to his witnessing the failed rising, and events such as the last dispersal of the clans at Ruthven and the "pacification" of Gaeldom. The way in which *Ossian* takes Fergusonian models to a cold-eyed logical conclusion could be seen as reflecting a differing experience of military causes and outcomes.

But these sorts of conclusions are only part of the point here. The larger aim of this article has been to demonstrate the rewards close engagement with Macpherson's *Ossian* offers to eighteenth century scholars in both reinforcing and refining some of the valuable work done recently in the field. All too frequently revisionist work on *Ossian* ignores the text itself in its efforts to proclaim Macpherson's cultural importance: the result is too many neat fits, too many easy answers, too many of the old assumptions left unexamined; in short, a state of affairs which does full credit neither to the complex nature of Macpherson's work, nor to the critical acumen which is calling our attention to these areas in the first instance. In the proceeding analytical comparison of the 'primitivism' of Ferguson and Macpherson, the aim has been to address this by demonstrating the worth of endeavours which seek both to read the text in terms of elements of its context and to re-read that context in the light of vital engagement with a particular text. Such a more determinedly text-centred approach to *Ossian*, a commitment to examining Macpherson's cultural locale as manifested in what he actually wrote, offers one way by which the current spate of overdue Macpherson revision can enter a more secure and self-sustaining phase.

NOTES

1. Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 254. See also Howard Gaskill, "'Ossian" at Home and Abroad', *Strathclyde Modern Language Studies*, 8 (1988), 5–27.
2. In addition to those others quoted in this article see also, as a representative

- example: Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988) and more recently 'Primitivism and the "Primitive" Poet: A Cultural Context for Macpherson's Ossian', in *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 79–96; Ken Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen, 1988); Sher, "'Those Scotch Impostors and their Cabal': Ossian and the Scottish Enlightenment' in *Man and Nature*, vol. 1 (Ont., 1982), pp. 55–65; most of the articles in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. by Howard Gaskill, (Edinburgh, 1991) but particularly David Raynor's and Steve Rizza's; Leah Leneman, 'Ossian and the Enlightenment' *Scotia* 11 (1987), 13–29; and from the Enlightenment perspective, Nicholas Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment' in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. by R. Porter and M. Teich, (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 19–40.
3. John Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the *Poems of Ossian*', in *Ossian Revisited*, pp. 164–199, (p. 183).
 4. Gaskill, "'Ossian" Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation', *Comparative Criticism* 8 (1986), 113–46, (p. 115). The situation has improved somewhat since 1986, but not as much as one would have hoped or expected.
 5. Gibbons, 'The Sympathetic Bond: Ossian, Celticism and Colonialism' in *Celticism*, pp. 273–92 (p. 284). Gibbon's article is a classic example of intelligent, enlightened criticism which takes Macpherson seriously while ignoring the text itself.
 6. John Small, *A Biographical Sketch of Adam Ferguson LL.D, F.R.S.E.* (Edinburgh, 1864), p. 11.
 7. Henry Mackenzie (ed.), *The Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1805), Appendix 4, 56–62, p. 59.
 8. *Report*, 62–5, p. 63 and p.64.
 9. 'Collaboration' is certainly the watchword for Sher. Raynor ('Ossian and Hume' in *Ossian Revisited*, pp. 147–61) and Gaskill ("Ossian" at Home and Abroad') also offer stimulating and accessible discussions (particularly the latter) of potential outside involvement.
 10. Sher, 'Percy, Shaw and the Ferguson "Cheat"', in *Ossian Revisited*, pp. 207–45 (p. 213). This article offers a compelling analysis of this unsavoury affair and is essential reading for gauging the temperature of cultural politics at the time.
 11. Saunders, pp. 293–9. The men also entered into a rather dubious collaboration in a parliamentary election campaign in 1780. See John Robertson's *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 175.
 12. Letter 15th September 1781, cited in Sher, 'Percy, Shaw, and the Ferguson "Cheat"', p. 233.
 13. *Report*, Appendix 4, p.65.
 14. *Report*, App. 4, p. 64. See also Sher, 'Percy, Shaw, and the Ferguson "Cheat"', p.236.
 15. Letter of 21 July 1781, quoted by Gaskill, introduction to *Ossian Revisited*, pp. 1–18 (p. 15).
 16. Introduction to Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1966), pp. xxxviii–ix.
 17. For recent revisionism in this area see Allan Macinnes' *Clanship, Commerce and*

- the House of Stuart, 1603–1788* (East Linton, 1996).
18. *OED*, meaning 1 c.
 19. Introduction to *Essay*, pp. xxxix and xxx.
 20. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. by Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995; from 1st ed., 1767), p. 99. All future references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.
 21. *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1996; from 3rd edition, 1765), p. 45. All future references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.
 22. The wording of this corrective note hints at Macpherson's general eagerness to defend his culture from its eighteenth century detractors.
 23. See Saunders, p. 282. Saunders gives a number of examples of Macpherson's generosity, a generosity (over rent payments, workers' pay, and in the remembrance of kindnesses done to James in his more lowly youth) which seems to hark back to the tenets of organic rather than contract society.
 24. For the 'first return to nature' see Mary Margaret Rubel *Savage and Barbarian. Historical Attitudes in the Criticism of Homer and Ossian in Britain 1760–1800* (Amsterdam, 1978). Rubel claims that this passage by Macpherson represents the first appearance of the three stage chronological synopsis of development (as opposed to Adam Smith's now more famous four stage theory), one which 'from the point of view of its clarity of exposition remained unsurpassed by any other historian during the following forty years' (p. 34).
 25. Introduction to *Essay* (1996), p. xvii.
 26. For the competing discourses of civic and commercial humanism see J.G.A. Pocock, 'Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the World View of the Late Enlightenment' in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 143–56 (p. 148), and more generally, his 'Virtues, Rights, and Manners', *ibid.*, pp. 37–50.
 27. Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–c.1830* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 234.
 28. Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 43.
 29. The contemporary Scottish resonances of Ferguson's comments are not our concern here.
 30. Womack, pp. 106–7.
 31. For evidence that *Ossian* was read by at least one reader in such terms see Paul J deGategno, "'The Source of Daily and Exalted Pleasure': Jefferson Reads the Poems of Ossian" in *Ossian Revisited*, pp. 94–108 (*passim* pp. 105–6).
 32. Adam Potkay, 'Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*', *P.M.L.A.*, no. 107 (1992), 120–31, (p. 122). Future references are in the text.
 33. Compare Sher: 'This militaristic aspect was made all the more appealing because it was sheathed in the polite veneer of Sentimental neo-classicism – here were poems that spoke of noble deeds but little bloodshed, rude manners mixed with lofty sentiments, much weeping and dying but no physical pain'. "'Those Scotch Impostors and their Cabal'", p. 58.
 34. The transferred eroticism of that last image is also characteristic: consummation is only ever achieved in death.
 35. Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 9 and p. 226. At least not in the sphere of affirmative action. Perhaps Potkay is closer to the

money if we limit his comments (as he would have been wiser doing) to *Ossian* as solving 'the stylistic and political contradiction of eloquence and polite style' (p. 228).

36. Cited in Small, p. 4. It is worth noting in passing that Ferguson here seems to figure himself as a visitor to, rather than inhabitant of, the Highlands.
37. Murray G..H. Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 184.
38. Introduction to the *Essay* (1996), p. ix.
39. *Ibid.*, p. x.

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