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CELTS, GREEKS, AND GERMANS Macpherson's Ossian and the Celtic Epic

Howard D. Weinbrot

In 1787 John Pinkerton laments that “this may be called the Celtic Century, for all Europe has been inundated with nonsense about the Celts.”¹ Whether sense or nonsense Celtomania reflects a gradual change in British attitudes towards the classical south, the Continent's Germanic north, and Britain's Scottish north. Such changes are part of the century-long battle between the Ancients and the Moderns and reflect even longer efforts to define national identity through national literature. In so doing, eighteenth-century British readers responded to their complex inheritance in several ways—including assessment of their Greek, German and, espe-

¹ Pinkerton, *A Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths. Being An Introduction To The Ancient and Modern History of Europe* (London: 1787), 123. For some linguistic aspects of Celtomania, see Daniel Droixh, *La Linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire 1660-1800. Rationalisme et révolutions positivistes* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978), 143-56. This paper originally was read to the International Society for the Classical Tradition, University of Tübingen, 15 August 1992. I am grateful to professors Wolfgang Haase and Meyer Reinhold for the invitation. I further explore many of the issues raised here in another essay and in an ample book. For these see “Politics, Taste, and National Identity: Some Uses of Tacitism in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition*, ed. T. James Luce and Anthony J. Woodman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and *Britannia's Issue. The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

cially for James Macpherson, their Celtic contexts.



All readers once knew that Homer was the father and best model of poetry, the encyclopedia of knowledge, and the exemplar of political wisdom. As John Ogilby tells Charles II in 1660, Homer is especially appropriate for kings because “he appears a most constant assertor of the Divine Right of Princes and Monarchical Government.” Even in 1714 Richard Fiddes speaks of the generally esteemed “universal Genius” Homer as the bedrock of orthodoxy. There is “Danger...either to revive, or raise Objections against” him. One year later Thomas Parnell reminds us that the permanently great and sublime *Iliad* will “be gaz’d at by Readers with an Admiration of its Perfection, and by Writers with a Despair that it should ever be emulated with Success.”²

By about the same time, however, another variously respected foreign voice is beginning to be heard in England. The presence of a Dutch king in 1689 and a German king and dynasty in 1714 remind panegyrist of the nation’s northern roots. They celebrate William of Orange for his ancestry in Germany and the Rhine where “Eternal Plenty’s found.” They also sing the Hanoverians as what in 1719 one called “The Pride and Glory of the *Saxon* Line!” In 1740 William Paterson extends that pride yet farther. He knows that “Tradition immemorial” links the Hanoverians to Arminius, the German destroyer of Varus and his three legions.³

Germans and Britons thus are cousins and allies against common enemies. In 1718 happy English readers hear that the French are “by Nature design’d as a Foil / To the bright *Saxon* look, the great Claim of our Isle.” The Romans and the

² Ogilby, *Homer his Iliads Translated* (London: 1669), A1; the original is italicized; Fiddes, *A Prefatory Epistle Concerning some Remarks To be published on Homer’s Iliad; Occasion’d by The Proposals of Mr. Pope towards a new English Version of that Poem. To the Reverend Dr. Swift* (London, 1714), 18, 112 (Danger); Parnell, “An Essay on the Life, Writings, and Learning of Homer,” in *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope, The Iliad*, ed. Maynard Mack, et al. (London: Methuen & Co.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 7: 80.

³ John Hughes, *The House of Nassau. A Pindarick Ode* (London: 1702), 2 (Eternal Plenty); *A Poem on the Anniversary of the Birth-Day of His Majesty King George* (London, 1719), 4 (Pride and Glory); Paterson, *Arminius. A Tragedy* (London: 1740), iv. Such remarks were commonplace.

French, “all long inveterate Enemies of England and Germany,” were alike defeated by Britons and by “our Parent Germans, Saxons, or Angles.” Thereafter, the Reverend John Freed also is among those who assume that “Our German Laws, and ancient Usages” help to “chace the Roman Eagle from these Plains” and “Stop, Frenchman,...from Gallia’s Shore.”⁴

With the help of Tacitus’ *Germania*, ancestral Germans also were useful against the legacy of 1066, which seemed a precursor of modern French ambition and an attempt to annihilate liberal Saxon politics. In 1647, for example, Nicholas Bacon distinguishes between native Saxon and alien French law. The free Saxons, he argues, made their laws through the people, whereas the Gauls made their laws only “by the great Men” and must therefore “be strangers in blood unto the Britons.” By the next century this commonplace was both accepted in France and re-imported to Britain. As Montesquieu says in 1748, Tacitus’ “admirable treatise” on the Germans shows “that it is from them the English have borrowed the idea of their political government. This beautiful system was invented first in the woods” of Germany.⁵

In different but related ways, then, Greece was a respected old norm and Germany was a respected new norm. One eloquently sang personal valor and the need for monarchic control; the other roughly sang political valor and the need

⁴ *The Illustrious Modern, With a Commission to the Knight of the Solecism* (London: 1718), 35 (Foil), 46 (Enemies). The unsigned author adds that “our Saxon Parents and Brethren were the Principall of those who tore the Roman Eagle from Italy, and finally fix’d it in Germany” (47). For Freed, see *Stigand: Or, The Antigallican. A Poem in Miltonic Verse* (London: 1750), 6.

⁵ Bacon, *Historical Discourse of the Uniformity of the Government of England. The First Part. From the first Times till the Reigne of Edward the Third* (London: 1647), 14–15. The book was reprinted in 1672, 1682, 1688, 1739, and 1760; the 1672 edition was suppressed by the Stuart government which, rightly I suspect, regarded it as a parliamentary tract. For Montesquieu, see *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, *A Compendium of the First Edition*, ed. David Wallace Carrithers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 213, Book 11, chapter 6. For comparable remarks, see Gilbert Stuart, *An Historical Dissertation concerning the Antiquity of the English Constitution* (Edinburgh, 1768), 290, Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London: Methuen & Co., 1900), 1: 213 (chapter 9 [1776], on Germany), and John Aikin, trans., *A Treatise on the Situation, Manners, and Inhabitants of Germany, and the Life of Agricola* (Warrington, 1777), vii. J. G. A. Pocock’s several studies remain essential in understanding the permutations of English constitutional thought. See, among other works, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century. A Reissue with a Retrospect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

for constitutional control. Given the cranky British nature of things each norm also was subject to severe reservations and rejection. Paradoxically, much of that rejection begins in France and its Académie before finding a home in Britain.



Charles Perrault's *Siècle de Louis le Grand* (1687) and consequent *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes* (1688–97) were the best known modern French salvos against the Ancients. These were seconded by numerous texts, including Houdar de la Motte's *Discours sur Homère* and his abbreviated, rationalized, and gallicized couplet version of the *Iliad* (1714). Houdar is commonplace in saying that "the whole *Iliad* is but a piece embroider'd with Pride, Anger and Revenge."⁶ Accordingly, in his own *Iliad* he teaches Greeks and Trojans to mind their manners, to behave like proper French gentlemen, and to cut one another's throats *avec bienséance*.

The brutal epic hero was indeed one of the chief targets in attacks on the poet and his poem. As René Rapin says in 1664, Achilles is a compendium of "Imperfections and Vices." Several years later Samuel Wesley calls Achilles a virtueless savage "only remarkable for his extraordinary *Strength* and little *Brains*." The encyclopedist Pierre Bayle well summarizes such remarks regarding the unadmirable *Iliad* and its venal, repugnant hero. "We must conclude," he says, "either that Homer had no idea of heroism, or that he designed to draw the character of a brutal wretch." Jean Terrasson later also draws an appropriate inference. In battle scenes, one should "imitate all the Poets in the World except *Homer*."⁷

⁶ Houdar, *Discourse on Homer's Iliad* (London: 1714), 10.

⁷ Rapin, "Comparaison des pœmes d'Homère et de Virgile," trans. as "A Comparison of Homer and Virgil" in *The Whole Critical Works of Monsieur Rapin*, trans. Basil Kennet, 2nd ed. (London: 1716), 1: 131; Wesley, *The Life of our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. An Heroic Poem*, 2nd ed. (London: 1697), a3'; Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), trans. as *A General Dictionary Historical and Critical*, trans. John Peter Bernard, Thomas Birch, John Lockman et al. (London, 1734–41), 1: 178n; Terrasson, *Discours sur Homère* (1715), trans. as *A Critical Dissertation Upon Homer's Iliad. Where Upon Occasion of this Poem, A New System of the Art of Poetry is attempted, founded upon the Principles of reason, and the Examples of the most illustrious Poets, both ancient and modern. By Abbé Terrasson, A Member of the Royal Academy of Sciences*, trans. [Francis Brerewood] (London: 1722), 2: 306.

Such advice reflects what Alexander Pope does in his softened translations and notes to Homer (1715–26) and his *Rape of the Lock* (1712–17). It also had been anticipated by one of the most popular works of eighteenth-century Europe, the Archbishop of Cambrai's *Télémaque* (1699). As Andrew-Michael Ramsay observes in 1717, his friend Fénelon's epic rejects the "fierce and brutish Revenge" and the "Lying and Dissimulation" of the *Iliad*. Instead, young Telemachus includes ancient virtues and banishes ancient vices. He has the passion and courage of Achilles without his savage rage; he has Ulysses' wisdom and statecraft without his trickery; he has a youth's sexual longings "without being Voluptuous"; and he has "the piety of *Aeneas*." The Abbé Terrasson sees some of the conflict and consequences of such revisionism. Homer's admirers hate *Télémaque* because of "the Honour it has brought to our Age, and the Shame with which it has branded *Homer*."

The "Age" also extends to later eighteenth-century Britain. In 1774 Percival Proctor includes this paean in the Advertisement to yet another version of the century's great Anglo-French moral epic: "TELEMACHUS is an Epic Poem, which, though in prose, is in no degree inferior to the *Iliad* or the *ÆNEID*." Fénelon is "in the foremost rank of the greatest writers."⁸ He clearly is so because his poem rejects Homer's cruel men and licentious gods, their pleasure in brutality, and what had come to be thought the dangerous literary, moral, and political lessons of a hitherto perfect poem for prince, poet, and reader.

Revisionists scarcely stopped with Greece. For all the English praise of German ancestors, they too remained a tarnished model with unpleasant historical baggage. Attacks on Germans were both general and particular.

No one could forget that the Goths ruined Rome's ruins and enough cultures, libraries, and lives to gladden the fiercest Achilles. For Thomas Brown in 1695 the Goths "destroy'd Learning root and branch"; for Nathan Bailey in 1730 they "brought into Subjection and Barbarism a great Part of the Christian World"; for Alexander Pope in 1743 Goths are an

⁸ Ramsay, "A Discourse upon Epic Poetry" (1717) in François de Salignac de la Motte Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus The Son of Ulysses*, trans. Isaac Littlebury and Abel Boyer (London, 1719), 1: 16–17; Terrasson, *Discourse*, 2: 608; *The Adventures of Telemachus, the Son of Ulysses*, trans. Proctor (London: 1774), b2' (epic), b2' (foremost).

emblem of a dead civilization. Later in the century Thomas Percy laments that the northern nations rose “upon the ruins of literature and the fine arts.” Edward Gibbon of course was sympathetic to Rome not her ravagers. He probably would have agreed with John Pinkerton who in 1787 observes that “the name of Goth...is an object of detestation.”⁹

Whatever Tacitus and Montesquieu might say, Britons could not yield the discovery of freedom to so destructive a people. In 1675 William Penn argues that liberty was English by temperament and birthright before the Saxons crossed the Channel—as, Algernon Sidney insists, is made plain in England’s omnipresent pre-Saxon representative counsels.¹⁰ The unknown author of *The Farmer’s Letter to the Protestants of Ireland* (Dublin, 1745) knows that a small number of divinely chosen free Saxons “flew over into Britain” while the remainder accepted tyranny at home. Accordingly, as he and so many commentators confidently insist, Britain holds “the only remaining Heirs of Liberty upon Earth” (5). Apparently, God chose a few Saxons because they already were spiritual Britons; the rest were typically dimwitted slavish foreigners. That disdain could take demonstrably political forms by those who opposed the Hanoverians and the German roots their supporters nourished.

Complaints regarding then enthroned aliens, for example, were staples of Jacobite rhetoric during the Scottish rebellion of 1745. One author calls them “the curst *Hanover* Race.” Another broods that foreign usurpers sacrifice English honor and treasure “to enlarge the Dominions of *Hanover*” and to

⁹ Brown, *A New and Easy Method to understand the Roman History...Done out of French, with very large Additions and Amendments* (London: 1695), A3’, from Brown’s Preface; Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum* (London: 1730), “Goths”; Pope, *Dunciad*, 3: 83–94; Percy, *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry Translated from the Islandic Language* (London: 1763), A2’; Pinkerton, as a complaint, *Dissertation on the...Goths* (n1, above), vii. Chapter 9 of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* admires ancient German energy and freedom, but also regards the German mind as of inverse proportion to its large body.

¹⁰ Penn, *England’s Present Interest Considered With Honour to the Prince. And Safety to the People* (1675), 4th ed. (London: 1698), 7; Sidney, *Discourses concerning Government* (1698, posthumous), as in Samuel Kliger, *The Goths in England: A Study in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 190–91. As a related explanation had it, the British preserved the shards of the Gothic constitution lost in Germany. See John Oldmixon, *A Critical History of England Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: 1724), 24–25. Like others, Oldmixon uses Tacitus to illumine “the Nature of the Saxon Government” (21).

appoint "German beggarly Favourites" to trample "the ancient Nobility." Yet another is pleased that at Prestonpans Charles Edward defeated "a *German Nero*," never mind that his actual adversary was the English dullard Lieutenant-General Sir John Cope, Knight of the Bath and Member of Parliament from 1722 to 1741.¹¹

Nor was anti-German anger limited to Jacobites. During the Seven Years War the British army was overextended and Germans were invited to defend Britain on her own soil. Unhappy patriots exploited familiar stereotypes for familiar purposes. The author of *A Serious Defence of Some Late Measures of the Administration* (1756) claims that some 16,000 stolid Hanoverians and Hessians will end "national Distinctions," mate with English women, and destroy English freedom. "Blessed Days! When the Influence of *Germanic Phlegm* shall extend itself o'er our public Councils, when the Pertness of *English Eloquence* shall be checked, and our Senates nod Assent" to government tyranny (17-18). The properly "germanized" nation then will not have "one home-spun *Englishman* to disgrace the Breed" (22).

Since Britons no longer believed that they descended from the loins of transient Trojans, anger at Achilles was academic rather than actual. That clearly was not the case regarding those troubled by actions and laws passed under the scarcely English-speaking reign des Welfen Georg-August von Braunschweig-Lüneburg, Kurfürst zu Hannover, ehmann der Charlotte Karoline von Brandenburg-Ansbach, und liebhaber von Amalie Sophie Marianne Wallmoden, gattin des Gottlieb Adam von Wallmoden in Hannover.

Such hostility was adaptable for literary purposes—which of course sometimes were political and, broadly speaking, cultural. I am speaking of James Macpherson, whose polished creation of Ossian the son of Fingal in about 1761 gave readers a chance to contrast earlier Celtic with earlier Germanic letters and values. Many found that Germanic literature was as

¹¹ These, and other, broadsides or poems probably appeared in Edinburgh, 1745, and are preserved in the Huntington Library's fine "Jacobite Rebellion" volume; Huntington Library shelf mark 321580: 11. For the works quoted, see, *An Excellent New Ballad, To the Tune of, The bonny Black Ladie* (curst); *The Duke of Wharton's Reasons for Leaving his native Country, and espousing the Causes of his Royal Majesty King James III, 2* (sacrificed); *On the Signal Victory at Gladsmuir, gain'd by His Royal Highness Prince CHARLES...By a LADY* (Nero).

objectionable as Germanic politics and soldiers. Hugh Blair is representative.

Regnor Lodbrog's eighth-century Icelandic dying ode, Blair says in 1763, is barbarous, ferocious, wild, harsh, irregular, animated, strong, metaphorical, and figurative, but Ossian presents a very different scene. He includes ancient "fire and...enthusiasm...with an amazing degree of regularity and art. We find tenderness, and even delicacy of sentiment, predominant over fierceness and barbarity." He melts the heart and elevates the spirit with "the highest ideas of magnanimity, generosity, and true heroism." The contrast with the Norse Edda is striking: "When we turn from the poetry of Lodbrog to that of Ossian, it is like passing from a savage desert, into a fertile and cultivated country." Similar remarks throughout the eighteenth century move in a similar direction, one well mapped by Nathan Drake in 1798. He laments the Gothic afterlife in which drinking, killing, and maiming are eternal amusements, and praises the Celtic afterlife in which Fingal's warriors "listened in rapture to the praise of their bards, who sung of friendship."¹²

These and other happy values appear in Macpherson's putative third-century Celtic epics *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763). I should at once make plain that I think these both

¹² Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), as reprinted in *The Poems of Ossian...To Which Are Prefixed A Preliminary Discourse and Dissertation on the Aera and Poems of Ossian* (Boston, 1851), ll. Subsequent references to this text and edition are cited in the text. For discussion of Blair and Macpherson, see Robert Morell Schmitz *Hugh Blair* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1948), 42-60, 88-90. For Drake, see *Literary Hours: Or Sketches Critical, Narrative, and Poetical*, 3rd ed. (London, 1804), 2: 213.

Studies of Macpherson have expanded greatly. I cite only a few representative works of recent years, to be supplemented by those cited in note 13 below as well. John L. Greenway, "The Gateway to Innocence: Ossian and the Nordic Bard as Myth," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 4 (1975): 161-70; Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Keith Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988); Fiona J. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage. A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988); Murray G. H. Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland. The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1991); Adam Potkay, "Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*," *PMLA* 107 (1992): 120-30.

largely fabrications and quickly tiresome.¹³ Whatever their worth, though, they have immense historical importance. They took much of Britain and Europe by storm, in part because their ancient veneer allows them to embody modern Anglo-Scottish anthropology, politics, and literary trends. Some of these are conventional reactions to contemporary events; others are so ugly that John Pinkerton cannot be scolded for calling Ossian “the last effort of Celticism to injure the history of Britain.”¹⁴

The ugliness is clearest in Macpherson’s *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771), a popular but intellectually dishonest, occasionally plagiarized, and morally corrupt version of British and European history.¹⁵ It tries to illuminate the earlier Ossian, to use it as an argument on authority, and thereby validate its authenticity. The *Introduction* also hopes to provide a simultaneously mythic and real alternative history and genealogy for the remnants of Europe’s

¹³ This remark once was thought too obvious to make. Several recent students of Macpherson and of eighteenth-century Scotland, however, have argued that he has been maliciously misunderstood and slandered by English Episcopalian bigots, most particularly Samuel Johnson. See, for example, Howard Gaskill, “‘Ossian’ Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation,” *Comparative Criticism* 8 (1986): 113–46, and essays by Gaskill and Richard Sher in Howard Gaskill, ed., *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991). As Mr. Gaskill puts it in that collection, “The rabid reactions still occasionally provoked in critics by Macpherson’s attempts to defend himself are possible only as a result of cocksure certainty of the truth which can be shown to rest on very shaky foundations indeed” (15).

¹⁴ Pinkerton, *An Enquiry into the History of Scotland* (London: 1789), 2: 84.

¹⁵ Quotations will be from *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland: Or, An Inquiry into the...Britons, Scots, Irish, and Anglo-Saxons*, 3rd ed. (London: 1773), and will be cited in the text. Parts of the *Introduction* are borrowed without attribution from Simon Pelloutier’s newly reissued *Histoire des Celtes, et particulièrement des Gaulois et des Germains* (Paris, 1771). John Whitaker offers this judgment in his *The Genuine History of the Britons Asserted Against Mr. Macpherson* (1772), 2nd ed. (London: 1773). He is guilty of “gross perversions even of his own quotations, and with such plain and manifest corruptions even of his own authorities, such erasings of records, and such interpolations of histories, as pain me greatly” (297). Macpherson’s racist ethnography is at least equally corrupt.

For further deservedly harsh contemporary judgment of the *Introduction*, see David Hume’s posthumously published “Essay on the Genuineness of the Poems” of Ossian, in *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, ed. John Hill Burton (Edinburgh: 1846), 1: 478. For Hume, Macpherson could only justify his work through “a particular revelation,” since its apparent evidence includes “palpable contradictions” and ethnography “unsupported by any author of antiquity.”

last great people.



The theory was about the same at least from Philip Clüver's influential *Germaniae antiquae* (1616) until well into the later eighteenth century.¹⁶ Namely, the genetic coherence of civilized western, central, and northern Europe created one great nation from about the Atlantic to the Elbe. Macpherson imposes his own agenda on this post-diluvian ethnography. His Gallic and Germanic peoples are Celts who spoke dialects of a common language and who covered most of the British Isles, Gaul, Germany, Spain, and the Italian peninsula (301-302). In whichever country, the Celts were beautiful, blond, blue-eyed, brave, clean, freedom-loving, moral, neat, poetic, and religious. Their chief competitors were the partially consanguine Romans, who helped to protect the civilized south, forced order upon the sometimes still crude Celtic north, and thereby encouraged limits upon the true barbarians who are Macpherson's demons.

These are the Sarmatians, or Sarmatic Germans, or Sarmatic Scandinavians, or the Eastern Sarmatians or Slavs. His Asian, polar, or mixed Asian and polar brutes include Angles, Avarris, Bulgaris, Goths, Marcomannis, Saxons, Scandinavians, Slavs, Tartars, Teutons, Vandals, and Venedis in the wild extreme European north, Asiatic east, and parts of central and eastern Europe. Whatever their name, they are cruel, homely, filthy, savage, self-destructive, short, and stupid. The Sarmatians indeed were so illiterate and profligate that they were neither "able to send down their language to posterity" (37-38) nor preserve the nations and peoples they defeated (41). They conquered the Celts only after Rome had softened and demor-

¹⁶ See, for example, Cluver, *Germaniae antiquae. Libri tres* (Leiden: 1616), including 21, 28, 75-87, and his *An Introduction into Geography, both Ancient and Modern* (Oxford: 1657), 74, 128. There are comparable remarks in numerous texts, including Johann Georg Kyssler, *Antiquitates septentrionales et Celticae* (Hanover: 1720), x. The commonplace was largely unchallenged until Johann Daniel Schoepflin's *Vindiciae celticae* (Strasbourg: 1754). Schoepflin's work was made more accessible through Simon Pelloutier's translation in his 1771 *Histoire des Celtes: "Dissertation Sur l'Origine des Peuples Celtes & sur leurs anciennes demeures."* In Britain, Bishop Percy enhances the refutation of Clüver. See his translation of Pierre-Henri Mallet's *Northern Antiquities: Or, A Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the Ancient Danes, And other Northern Nations* (1755-56), (London: 1770), 1: iii, for example.

alized them, and only through mindless valor and numbers rather than virtue and intelligence (237).

Celtic virtue and Sarmatic vice were clear in their different modes of religion and visions of heaven. The Celts were deeply influenced by Druids, who absorbed and propagated the best of Hebrew and Greek learning. They were monotheists, encouraged bards who beautifully inculcated Druid wisdom, and made their heaven a place of peace, respect for chaste women, and a possible spring board for happy visits to beloved earthly haunts. The Druidless Sarmatians worshipped inanimate objects, wrote cruel poetry, continued their martial brutality in their sensual permanently fixed heaven, and discarded all but the harshest warrior women and the Valkyrie who were no better than they should be. All this, Macpherson knows, offers "undoubted proofs of [Sarmatians] being a different race of men from the Celtae" (20). The debased and debasing but martially triumphant Sarmatians are the ancestors and progenitors of the dim, dirty, ragged, small, and obviously inferior peoples who now crowd the streets of Europe's cities.

Macpherson provides a more local theory of causation that explains much regarding the relationship between England and Scotland and the submerged narrative of his Ossian poems. The Sarmatic Vandals were the parents of two obscure but similar tribes—the Angles, "from whom the majority of the English nation derive their blood, and the whole their name," and the Saxons (330). Each shared the Goths' and Vandals' "natural love of depredation" and joined in the sacking of Rome (332). By clear implication, the Angles and the Saxons did to Rome what their heirs the English did to Scotland.

Accordingly, early in the *Introduction* Macpherson insists that "The Saxons in Britain are the most unmixed of the posterity of the Sarmatae, who first settled on the southern shore of the Baltic." The English owe their constitution, language, and "the peculiarity of their manners, to that very ferocity, which left their ancestors without subjects, in the country their arms subdued" (38). The Anglo-Saxon gods are "as fierce and untractable as themselves" (340); the people love absolutism in politics (381) and genocide in conquest: "The ferocious bravery of the Anglo-Saxons, when it procured to them dominions, deprived them of subjects. Their cruelty, cooperating with the obstinacy of their unfortunate enemies, left their blood and manners unmixed in their conquests" (392).

At least one of those obstinate enemies, however, remained alive, resentful, and proud of his unmixed blood. He would show the sanguinary Sassenachs the virtue they could neither comprehend nor absorb, and the nature of a truly noble primitive Celtic culture that both then and now shames the Sarmatic Goths to whom they nevertheless are forced to bow. The Ossian poems themselves play out this anger by subtle Jacobitism that pits the Celt against the German and the world.



Macpherson's Ossian is a melancholic poet, a blind bard who mourns his own and his nation's decay. At the end of *Fingal* he says "I...joined the bards, and sung of battles of the spear.—Battles! where I often fought; but now I fight no more! The fame of my former actions is ceased; and I sit forlorn at the tombs of my friends!" At the end of *Temora* triumphant Fingal seems to mourn the death of a race as he gives his spear to Ossian and encourages nostalgia: "Look to thy fathers, my son; they are awful beams...Let not the fallen be forgot, they were mighty in the field."¹⁷

Those mighty fathers recall the recent Stuart past now mourned in Ossian's Jacobite alternative history or martyrology. "Dar-Thula," for example, suggests aspects of the '45 and Charles Edward's campaign against George II: Nathos, a prince educated abroad, returns to Scotland and, "though very young, took command of Cuchullin's army, made head against Cairbar the usurper, and defeated him in several battles" before treachery forced his own retreat (155n). The English prince Lathmon deviously tries to seize Morven in Fingal's absence, is defeated, spared, educated, and sent home. The plot of *Temora* concerns Fingal's conquest of the usurper Cairbar and the restoration of Ireland to its rightful ruling house (2). The Ossian poems generally assume succession, family, and the

¹⁷ Macpherson, *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, In Six Books: Together with several other Poems, composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal. Translated from the Galic Language* (London: 1762), 84; subsequent references to *Fingal* and shorter poems from this edition are cited in the text. See also *Temora, An Ancient Epic Poem. In Eight Books: Together with several other Poems, Composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (London, 1763), 155; subsequent references to *Temora* also are from this edition and are cited in the text.

line of father (Fingal), son (Ossian), and grandson (Oscar) excluded from the diminished modern world.

Moreover, Ossian's world alludes to those who now are in power and why—Culloden, where Cumberland's Red Coats used bayonets, bullets, and swords to finish the job their cannons started, the later hunting and killing of survivors, and the starvation and forced migration of so many Highland families. Surely Ossian's image of the polite, generous, merciful Celtic soldier who defends national autonomy, returns home after conquest, and respects his worthy enemy is designed as a Scottish answer to Anglo-Saxon or Sarmatian barbarism. The parenthetic aside in this note to *Temora* takes on elegiac significance when we recall that all the Scottish wounded at Culloden were left to die or were murdered after battle: "The knowledge of curing the wounded was, till of late, universal among the Highlanders" (148n).

Highland martial triumph once also was universal. Ossian is supposed to have been written late in the third century; but he ranges chronologically from about the first to the ninth centuries and suggests a transcendent and enduring Highland Celtic culture. Hence in *Fingal* Cuchullin is a first-century Irish hero who needs Scottish Fingal to preserve his crown. In "The War of Caros" Fingal defeats Carausias, a late third-century Belgic Gaul leading a Roman army. In "Lathmon" he defeats an English invader at some indeterminate time. In "Caric Thura" he defeats both eighth-century Danish invaders and Odin, the great Norse god. In *Fingal* itself he defeats the Norse king and hero Swaran who had dominated both the Irish and the Scot named Gaul until Fingal rescues them. Here indeed is Europe's conquered plenty: England, France, Gaul, the Goths, Ireland, and Rome, not to mention a spare god or two. Here also is a metaphor of Scots' Celtic superiority: Rome defeated or beleaguered most of these cultures; so did Celtic Scotland which, on this scenario, also defeated Rome itself while defeating Gothic darkness and embracing moral polish impossible for Sarmatic Anglo-Saxon England or even partially Celtic ancient Rome.

As Tobias Smollett says in 1762, Macpherson "vindicates the glory of his own country, in producing such heroes as Fingal and Ossian."¹⁸ As Hugh Blair adds in 1763, Ossian

¹⁸ Smollett, *Critical Review* 12 (1761): 406.

writes a "*Poetry of the Heart*" that is "penetrated with noble sentiments, and with sublime and tender passions; a heart that glows and kindles the fancy." Blair also reminds us of the relationship between ethnic and poetic superiority. Fingal's "moderation, humanity, and clemency" were inculcated by Celtic bards "to the Celtic warriors from their childhood" (14-15). Consequently, in "humanity, magnanimity, virtuous feelings of every kind, our rude Celtic Bard" leaves Homer's and Virgil's heroes "far behind" (23).

In certain respects he does indeed do that, for Macpherson repudiates presumed Greek as well as German epic and moral values. Here too, we recall, he was exploiting long familiar topoi regarding the primitive ferocity of a martial hero like Achilles. The bards were an order of the Druids who humanely educated the Celts in moral ways impossible for unenlightened Homer. Ossian the son of Fingal not only was the last of the great Celtic warriors; he also was the last of the great Celtic bards. He intuited what Sir Walter Scott observed about Fingal. He "has all the strength and bravery of Achilles, with the courtesy, sentiment, and high-breeding of Sir Charles Grandison."¹⁹



We recall that for many eighteenth-century commentators Achilles and his colleagues were either morally unacceptable or dusty, muscular museum pieces no longer alternatives for modern culture. Macpherson himself is equally disapproving in the notes to *Ossian* and in the Preface to his own *Iliad of Homer Translated* (1773), very much in the tradition of Houdar de la Motte and the Moderns. Macpherson laments that Homer's overlong battle scenes suggest that he liked blood: "The ferocity of his heroes raises not the most amiable idea of his own mind." Though Homer is "partial to Achilles, yet Hector has been ever the favorite of the reader"—perhaps because of Achilles' savagery, perhaps because of the improbability of Achilles' actions in the final battle, or perhaps

¹⁹ Scott, *Edinburgh Review* (1805), 4th ed., 6 (1808): 446. Scott is reviewing the *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland* regarding the authenticity of Ossian, and Malcolm Laing's commentary and edition of *The Poems of Ossian*, each in 1805.

because in elevating Achilles' valor Homer tarnished it with the unlikely "cowardice of his foe" (xiii).

Macpherson's judgment of sadistic Homer is an eighteenth-century orthodoxy. Readers reacted with understandable revulsion to his graphic buckets of blood, bashed teeth, slashed tongues, rolling heads, separated arms, shattered necks, hewn shoulders, burst entrails, bloody eyes, split skulls, minced brains, stripped armor, taunted dying, and threats of more, worse, and continuing brutality until the dogs and vultures are sated. Much of this slaughter is summed up in the image of Achilles' Myrmidons as, in Pope's words, insatiable "voracious Wolves" goiging themselves "with slaughter." Richmond Lattimore calls them "wolves who tear flesh raw."²⁰

Wolves are best left in the wild or converted to Christianity. By declawing and rewriting Homer, modern commentators and epic writers advertise their superior new culture and thus offer precedent for Ossian's extension of that technique to Scotland and its superior old culture. Milton, Blackmore, Pope, Hildebrand Jacob, and Fielding help to soften the epic in Britain.²¹ Houdar de La Motte and, we recall, especially, Fénelon in his admired and popular *Télémaque* do so in France. The anti-Homeric eighteenth-century hero thus wins approbation removed from Achilles—and, for our purposes, given to Fingal.

Hugh Blair is among the first to emphasize such contrasts. He observes that the *Iliad's* "perpetual fighting" tires the reader with "War and bloodshed." Ossian's mixture of "war and heroism, with love and friendship—of martial, with tender scenes" perhaps transcends "any other poet" (27–28). In 1789 Walter Churchey adapts and comments upon *Fingal*. Unlike tyrants' infernal wars, the war in *Fingal* "is founded on...*Self-defence*, or even upon a *nobler* principle, that of defending the

²⁰ Pope, *The Iliad* (n. 2 above), 8: 246, from 16. 194, 201. The passage nonetheless includes Pope's typical softening of Homer's savagery. For Lattimore, see *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 334, from 16. 156–57.

²¹ Milton, Pope, and Fielding are of course well known and well read. Sir Richard Blackmore's epics are known only to those with masochistic patience and large coffee mugs. See his *Prince Arthur* (1695), *King Arthur* (1697), *Eliza* (1705), *Creation* (1712), and *Alfred* (1723). For Jacob, see *Brutus the Trojan: Founder of the British Empire* (1735). Excessively diligent students of the form also may wish to read the violent but mock epic by Paul Whitehead, *The Gymnasiad, Or Boxing Match* (1744).

kingdom of an infant King from such an iron spirit as *Swaran*." In so performing, Fingal is like "a Christian Hero...deemed the Champion of Innocence" and is engaging in a cause that justifies war, as classical causes apparently do not. Ossian's exemplary conduct thus encourages "honour and hospitality, mildness and generosity, chastity and all the social virtues" in this world, and solemn respect for good beings in the next world.²²

Blair's and Churchey's conclusions regarding Homer and Ossian are consistent with Anglo-European commonplaces strengthened by Ossian's example and by commentators as different as Scottish Protestant Smollett in 1762 and Catholic Italian Cesarotti in 1801: Fingal is the best hero because the most humane hero. For Cesarotti, Fingal enjoys "almost all the qualities that can ennoble human nature; that can either make us admire the hero, or love the man"—as combatant, peaceful monarch, and "father of his people." No wonder Cesarotti insists that the character of Connal cannot "be found in Homer. He is a wise and moderate hero; although a great warrior, he is always an advocate for peace" in a poem whose "beautiful, refined" virtues we seek "in vain...in Homer."²³

These comparisons also were based on specific passages. Smollett, followed by Ewen Cameron, challenges Homer's admirers "to compare the Battle between *Fingal* and *Swaran*" with Achilles and Hector: "No Savages are more cruel than the *Greeks* and *Trojans* were, as generally described by *Homer*." In contrast, "To mourn over the Fall of their Enemies, was a Practice universal among the *Celtic* Heroes." Ossian's Celtic warriors, Cesarotti says, provide "a family of heroes" to make those of Homer and even the cultivated Virgil blush.²⁴ A look at some of Ossian's battle scenes suggests the basis for such pro-Celtic, anti-Homeric and pro-modern judgments that, in the two latter cases at least, find sympathetic English ears.

²² Churchey, *Poems and Imitations of the British Poets* (London, 1789), [330-31].

²³ Cesarotti, *The Poems of Ossian, in The Original Gaelic...And a Translation from the Italian of the Abbè Cesarotti's [1801] Dissertation on the Controversy Respecting the Authenticity of Ossian, With Notes and a Supplemental Essay, by John M'Arthur* (London, 1807), 1: clxxxix (Homer), cxcii (beautiful).

²⁴ Smollett, *Critical Review* 13 (1762): 48, adapted by Cameron in his richly annotated, and indebted, *The Fingal of Ossian...Translated from the Original Galic Language, By Mr. James MacPherson; And Now Rendered into Heroic Verse* (London: 1777), 304, 308, 321; Cesarotti, "Dissertation," in *Poems of Ossian*, 2: 301.

Death is a constant companion in the Ossian cycle, but it is polite, softens its blow, often hopes to leave without doing its job, and prefers to be elsewhere. Blood pours, but it too seems less crimson and would as soon stay at home flowing serenely from ventricle to ventricle. Ossian's warriors thus do not break skulls and rib cages, cut throats or tear arms from their sockets; they do not strip the armor from a fallen adversary, insult his final moments, or joy in the end of his rotten family. Ossian's warriors break shields; blood is generalized and often streams from unspecified wounds or a generic side; and it is drawn in sorrow. Warriors are respected in death as in life, build tombs for the fallen enemy, and instruct their bards to celebrate him in memorable song. Similes generally are not based on savage animals lusting for blood, but on familiar nature and pacific activities: "As stones that bound from rock to rock; as axes in echoing woods; as thunder rolls from hill to hill, in dismal broken peals; so blow succeeded to blow, and death to death" (*Fingal*, Book 4: 55).

Such killing is a last resort for Fingal. He knows that young Orla is no match for him and offers honorable peace rather than mortal combat: "partake the feast of my shells, and pursue the deer of my desert" (Book 5: 64). Orla refuses and respectfully asks that triumphant Fingal return Orla's sword to his wife to inspire his son's valor. He also asks Fingal to build a large tomb to celebrate Orla's heroism. Fingal weeps, agrees to these terms, and during combat reluctantly kills Orla. He then instructs his sons in funeral rites for heroic Orla's respected memory, body, and family, while perhaps also recalling and varying the bow of Ulysses:

the feeble will find his bow at home, but will not be able to bend it. His faithful dogs howl on his hills, and his boars, which he used to pursue, rejoice. Fallen is the arm of battle; the mighty among the valiant is low! Exalt the voice, and blow the horn, ye sons of the king of Morven: let us go back to Swaran, and send the night away on song. (Book 5: 66)

Swaran King of Lochlin was the great adversary, the Norse invader of Ulster whom Fingal repulses. We immediately recall the precedents of Achilles and Hector, Æneas and Turnus, and perhaps Michael and Satan and the Son and Satan: these demand a contest in which one hero seeks to kill the

other for his nation's benefit and values. Even angels are wounded, mangled, cloven, shivered, and overturned in Book 6 of *Paradise Lost* and its attribution of epic gore to a Homeric Satan. Unlike Milton, Macpherson does not portray merciless ancient brutality. Here is his brief epic conflict between Fingal and Swaran. Its images are drawn from domestic activity or nature; it culminates in a wrestling contest and the bard's celebration of the defeated living hero; and there is not one drop of blood shed. Smollett knew that this scene commented upon its Homeric parallel, in which the unreliable gods, cruel Achilles, and betrayed cowardly Hector acted in their morally deficient world.

There was the clang of arms! there every blow, like the hundred hammers of the furnace! Terrible is the battle of the kings, and horrid the look of their eyes. Their dark-brown shields are cleft in twain; and their steel flies, broken, from their helmets. They fling their weapons down. Each rushes to his hero's grasp. Their sinewy arms bend round each other: they turn from side to side, and strain and stretch their large spreading limbs below. But when the pride of their strength arose, they shook the hill with their heels; rocks tumble from their places on high; the green-headed bushes are overturned. At length the strength of Swaran fell; and the king of the groves is bound.

Thus...have I seen two dark hills removed from their place by the strength of the bursting stream. They turn from side to side, and their tall oaks meet one another on high. Then they fall together with all their rocks and trees. The streams are turned by their sides, and the red ruin is seen afar. (Book 5: 62-63)

Thereafter, Fingal leads Swaran to his camp, celebrates, consoles, and forgives him, and allows his dignified return to Lochlin. Fingal calls for music to end the dismal "noise of arms. And let a hundred harps be near to gladden [Swaran] the king of Lochlin. He must depart from us with joy.—None ever went sad from Fingal" (Book 6: 74). Swaran agrees never again to fight with Fingal and praises his wisdom: "Blest be thy soul...Take now my hand in friendship...Let thy bards mourn those who fell" and celebrate the place of their combat (Book 6: 78). Fingal adds the poem's usual melancholic

reservations: "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. Our names may be heard in the song, but the strength of our arms will cease." Macpherson is commenting upon the insufficiencies of classical epics and of modern Scotland's inability to sustain its ancient noble culture; he also is commenting upon his own role in establishing the new culture: "Let the night pass away on the sound, and morning return with joy," Fingal says to Ossian and the bards (Book 6: 79).

Contemporary readers rightly contrasted Ossian with Homer; they were also contrasting Scottish primitive advanced culture with Greek primitive debased culture. For Britain and much of Europe Ossian was not the Homer of the north. That label would have seemed a contradiction in terms to Fingal, Macpherson's generous, sentimental, and solemn creation who often exemplifies the superiority of the Celtic European north to the south and of the Moderns to the Ancients.



Macpherson's Celtic epic, then, clearly plays off against lingering hostility to ancient Greece and, loosely speaking, both medieval and modern Germany or the Germanic north. For Macpherson, the Highland Celt is superior to any hero of any culture of any time. Such implicit and often Jacobite proclamation of course suggests why his Ossian poems were beloved within Scotland, a proud nation naturally reluctant to accept its provincial status in Britain. Ossian, though, hunts and captures many other trends, and appeals to other contemporary interests while seeming ancient. As *Fingal's* reviewer in the *Journal des savans* says in 1762, Ossian's sentimental scenes "ont l'air de ces embellissemens modernes que nous avons admis dans nos Drames & dans nôtre Epopée pour augmenter l'intérêt." As one B. G. tells Edmond Baron de Harold in 1787, Ossian surpasses all epic poets of all nations and ages because he "melts each heart" and because "nature speaks thro' him, and breaths and acts each part." And as John Colquhoun says in 1806, Ossian is "almost proverbial in Germany for

everything that is wild, romantic, melancholy, pathetic, and sublime.”²⁵

Here is a poet who joins the needs of the old and new, the artful and natural, the French and Germans, the reader of Achilles and of Sir Charles Grandison. He surely also can appeal to England as well as Scotland. He does so in part, I suggest, by exploiting ongoing modern revulsion with the literary and moral values of the Greek epic, and with roughly comparable Germanic values and their modern political ramifications and negative associations.

Moreover, by so writing Macpherson also suggests that he is very much in the main stream of modern thought, that the warriors he sings at once share modern values—and are safely dead. Many in Saxon England flocked to the Celtic hero's side because his poems are static not revolutionary. They affirm the death of the threatening Scottish north; they provide elegant dirges that are emblems of the tombs within the poems; they emphasize hierarchy within the family, state, and international community; they affirm magnanimity, mercy, sentiment, and taste; they do so in familiar English diction that recalls the English Bible; and they offer both fragments and complete epics with a coherent Aristotelian beginning, middle and end, to satisfy two kinds of taste. In short, the putative Ossian's Celtic poems are enormously popular because they are enormously conventional. Two of those conventions that Macpherson adapted and played upon so well, were the continuing attack on Greek violence and the newer attack on German violence, often in English costume. For Macpherson third-century Scotland is a perfect vehicle for commenting on eighteenth-century Britain.

²⁵ *Journal* (November, 1762): 729; “On Ossian By B. G.,” in *Poems of Ossian Lately Discover'd by Edmond Baron de Harold* (Dusseldorf, 1787), xiii; Colquhoun, Sir John Sinclair, *A Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (London: 1806), clxxvii.