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Derick Thomson and the Ossian Controversy

Abstract

This paper focuses on Derick Thomson's engagement with the Ossian controversy and maps his contributions, both scholarly and popularising, and the development of his attitudes. As the Gaelic dimension of the Ossian controversy still tends to be overlooked and many contributors to the debate exhibit very little awareness of it, a survey of Thomson's scholarship provides numerous relevant impulses for further research. Moreover, since many aspects of Thomson's career have not received due attention, this essay also strives to provide more understanding of Derick Thomson as a scholar.

Keywords: Derick Thomson (Ruaraidh MacThòmais), James Macpherson, Ossianic poetry, Ossian controversy, Scottish Gaelic studies

1. Introduction

To this day, the chief association with “the poems of Ossian” would likely be “the famous fraud,” “the great hoax.” Such opinions can be heard from students and even scholars working in Scottish and British literature: Ossianic poetry is a scam and James Macpherson was a cunning trickster who has been rightfully exposed by apostles of truth. This label all too often means that a vastly important phenomenon with momentous impact on European literature and art in the 18th and 19th centuries is omitted from course syllabi, conference programmes, and general discourse. In terms of research, the situation has been changing, mostly due to the gradual rise of Scottish and Scottish Gaelic Studies as a field – one such hopeful sign is the publication of the *International Companion to James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Scottish Literature International, 2017) – but there is still much to be done.

But whose perception has been shaping the views of Macpherson and Ossian? More people would likely list Samuel Johnson or Hugh Trevor Roper among their influences, if they were able to cite a specific name, rather than John Francis Campbell or Derick Thomson, proving once more that until recently commentators with little or no knowledge of the language and cultural context could enjoy prestige and recognition as experts on Scottish Gaelic matters (and in some cases

this still holds true).¹ An exceptionally exciting chapter in Scottish and European cultural history has thus been put aside, labelled a fraud, with the debate revolving around the axis of fraudulence/authenticity, and the opinions of scholars who actually had a profound knowledge of the subject and tended to express a balanced opinion, neither blackening Macpherson nor extolling him, unfortunately enjoying much less currency.

2. Derick Thomson and His Ground-Breaking Research into the Ossian Contribution

One of the greatest contributors to Ossian scholarship in the 20th century was Derick S. Thomson (1921–2012, Ruaraidh MacThòmais in Gaelic).² Thomson is acknowledged as one of the best Scottish Gaelic poets of the 20th century and has been described as the father of modern Gaelic publishing and a man who did more for the preservation and development of the Gaelic language than anyone else in the history of the Gael. Thomson grew up in a bilingual family on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides and from early on, exhibited a keen interest in poetry, scholarship, and Scottish national independence. He studied at Aberdeen and at Cambridge and enjoyed a long and respected career as a scholar and academic. He was appointed Assistant in Celtic at the University of Edinburgh in 1948 and moved to Glasgow in 1949 to take up a newly established lectureship in Welsh. The most substantial academic outcome of his interest in Welsh language and literature was a highly acclaimed edition of *Branwen Uerch Lyr* (1961, Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies), the second of the four branches of the Mabinogion.

In 1956, he was appointed Reader in Celtic and served as the Head of the Celtic Department at the University of Aberdeen, where he spent seven years. In 1963, he became Chair of Celtic at the University of Glasgow and held the position for almost thirty years, until his retirement in 1991. As Donald Meek points out,

his academic hallmark lay pre-eminently in placing Gaelic literature, rather than the minutiae of the language itself, at the centre of his curriculum. The rebalanced programme for Celtic and Gaelic studies was particularly evident at Glasgow where, as Professor, he built a powerful and vibrant department which was at its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, and contributed immensely to the formation of Gaelic teachers, broadcasters, writers and academics. (2012, 18)

Thomson's *Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (1974) and *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (1983, edited) played a pivotal part in making information about Gaelic literature and culture accessible to the English-speaking public and remain both indispensable and so-far unsurpassed. From 1961 to 1976, he edited *Scottish Gaelic Studies* and also served as President of the Scottish Gaelic Text Society (Comunn Litreachas Gàidhlig na h-Alba) and prepared some of its volumes, such

as *The MacDiarmid MS Anthology* (1992) and selected poems of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (1996). The works of the great 18th-century poet were one of Thomson's lifelong research interests, the other being Macpherson's Ossian. Both these topics have an important European and political dimension, which is probably one of the reasons why Thomson was attracted to them in the first place.

His first and ground-breaking contribution to the field was the book based on the thesis which he submitted as the conclusion of his degree in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Cambridge, entitled simply *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's "Ossian"* (1952). The title itself makes an important and radical statement – it suggests that there were Gaelic sources Macpherson could use and that he did use them. A similar point was made already by the great 19th-century folklore collector John Francis Campbell³ in the introduction to the fourth volume of his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (5–23), but Thomson was the first scholar who undertook the task of identifying the particular passages in specific ballads and devoted a monograph to the subject.

He describes the volume as an “attempt to illustrate Macpherson's manner of working” and “to identify particular sources which he may have used,” stressing that the novel point is not the evidence used, but the approach (1952, 9), consisting in “a detailed comparison of Macpherson's texts with authentic Gaelic ballads” (10). His verdict is that it can be proved, conclusively in most cases, that Macpherson used “some fourteen or fifteen ballads” and that “the use he makes of his material varied from ballad to ballad,” ranging from passing references in one or two instances to very close engagement in other cases, and that “we can point with some degree of confidence to the exact source or sources which he used” (10). He notes that the merging of motifs and characters from the Ulster cycle and the Fenian cycle, something Macpherson was reproached for, was in fact merely following an existing trend in the popular tradition (11).

Thomson concludes that Macpherson probably arranged his material in his own way, using ideas “against which the reader familiar with Irish and Scottish Gaelic tales is prejudiced,” but notes that it is “perhaps not impossible that Macpherson was, in fact, under the impression that he was collecting the ‘disjecta membra’ of an old Gaelic epic” (12). These findings go against the widespread impression that there were no sources to be employed and that Macpherson “made it all up.” The consideration of Macpherson's possible beliefs and motifs is a conjecture, and an acknowledged one at that, but when assessed in the light of the fact that Macpherson must have encountered different versions of the same stories, with recurring motifs and characters, assuming that it all had one source that got corrupted by years of oral and written transmission does not seem such a wild surmise.

In the introduction, Thomson also looks back on the controversy of two hundred years and sums it up with remarkable assurance and clarity, backed by detailed acquaintance with the multiple and often confusing sources, and the

historical and philosophical contexts. He points out that the debate was “misdirected for more than a century,” as “the point of issue was taken to be whether there existed Gaelic poems, preferably in ancient MSS, composed by a bard called Ossian in the third century A.D.” (3). These clearly did not exist but what did exist were the Ossianic ballads, common throughout the Highlands and Islands in the 18th century and long before. These were, however, treated with contempt by some enquirers into the matter, notably William Shaw, who showed disgust that the evidence produced was largely of an oral nature (3–4). However, these ballads are to be regarded as the much sought-after sources of Macpherson’s publications (5). Thomson thus points out that the controversy was also affected by the dichotomy between the supposedly pristine original and the corrupted copy, the manuscript fetish, and disdain for orally transmitted literature.

Fortunately, not everyone shared William Shaw’s attitudes and Thomson stresses that “the Ossianic controversy had the good result of stimulating investigation into the oral traditions of the Highlands, and in the course of this investigation many collections of Ossianic ballads were made, and others which had been made previously were brought to light” (5).

Coming to Thomson’s monograph almost seventy years later and glancing over the contents, with chapters such as “Macpherson’s debt to Irish historians,” “Macpherson’s use of his sources,” “The Gaelic ‘Ossian’ of 1807,” and “Letters and testimonies bearing on the controversy,” it is evident that it elucidates numerous points of continuing widespread confusion. The information is there, but the combination of factors touched upon at the beginning of this essay and the startling lack of attention paid to Thomson’s works in general means that it has not reached the audience it should have influenced, namely everyone with a serious interest in Scottish literature in general and the Ossian controversy in particular.

Thomson continued to work on the subject throughout his life. His academic articles on the topic include: “Bogus Gaelic Literature c. 1750 – c. 1820,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow* (Vol. 5, 1958); “Ossian, MacPherson, and the Gaelic World of the Eighteenth Century,” *Aberdeen University Review* (Vol. XL, 1963); “Macpherson’s Ossian: Ballads to Epics,” *The Heroic Process* (Dun Laoghaire, 1987); “Macpherson’s Ossian: Ballad Origins and Epic Ambitions,” *Religion, Myth, and Folklore in the World’s Epics*, ed. Lauri Honko (1990); and “James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension,” *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, ed. F. Stafford and H. Gaskill (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998). He discussed the reception of Ossian in Japan in “Oisean san Iapan” [‘Ossian in Japan’] in *Gairm* 76 (1971) and contributed the entry “Ossian” to *Cassell’s Encyclopaedia of World Literature*, Vol. 1 (1972), to *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, ed. Derick Thomson (1983, 1994), and the entry “Macpherson and Ossian” to *A Companion to Scottish Culture*, ed. David Daiches (1981).

In terms of impact, one of the most influential pieces is the summary in *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*. Thomson edited the volume and contributed many

of the entries. The companion was intended as a handbook of the most important information on Gaelic Scotland in English and the entries are succinct, cutting to the heart of the matter. Given the limited space and the expected impact of the publication, Thomson chose to say the following about Macpherson:

MacPherson was neither as honest as he claimed nor as inventive as his opponents implied. In *Fingal*, his most elaborate work, we can identify at least twelve passages, some of them fairly lengthy, in which he used genuine Gaelic ballad sources, sometimes specific versions. He used, for example, ballads dealing with Garbh mac Stairn and Manus for the groundwork of his plot, and three other ballads ('Fingal's Visit to Norway,' 'Duan na h-Inghinn' and 'Ossian's Courtship') for important episodes or sub-plots; other ballads were exploited in a more restricted way. He used many names from the ballads, often distorting them violently, and he juggled historical data to suit his own ends. (1994, 189–190)

One cannot say that Thomson seeks to extol Macpherson, he is rather harsh towards him, but even in this harsh tone, he puts forward two crucial points that other supposed experts on the matter refuse to realise – the names of the specific ballads and a description of the different ways Macpherson worked with the Gaelic material.

In all his contributions to Ossian scholarship, Thomson sought to stress one vital aspect of the phenomenon that tended to be overlooked in many contributions, i.e. the Gaelic dimension of the whole affair. His last longer work on the subject, "James Macpherson: The Gaelic Dimension" sums up many of his conclusions. In the essay, Thomson goes back to letters written by people Macpherson was staying with on his return from his collecting trip to the Hebrides and points out that he indeed had in his possession the Book of the Dean of Lismore, one of the most important surviving Gaelic manuscripts. He sums up that "a significant part of the work of creating *Fingal* was taking place in Badenoch in early 1761, with the active collaboration of a Gaelic poet who seems to have been making a fairly accurate translation of passages from *Fingal*, while various authentic Gaelic manuscripts and orally-delivered versions were floating about in the background" (1998, 20–21).

He also returns to the issue of authenticity: "[...] it is clearly established that he used a range of ballads in a number of different ways, sometimes adopting and adapting a plot, sometimes producing a loose translation of a sequence of lines or stanzas, and more often taking names or incidents or references from the Gaelic texts and reproducing variants of these. [...] The most detailed use of Gaelic ballads is in *Fingal*, while *Temora* is least indebted to Gaelic sources" (21). Thomson's conclusion is that "Macpherson was acquainted with a good range of Gaelic ballads, and had access to fairly good advice from friends, but relied rather much on his own faulty Gaelic judgement, and in any case had a grand plan which placed his Gaelic sources in a somewhat subsidiary role" (23). In

the closing part of the essay, Thomson notes that “Macpherson’s legacy, in the Gaelic context, was a mixed one, generating a significant amount of collecting, literary and even scholarly activity, some dubious literary activity, some political debate, and, more distantly, genuine literary admiration and stimulation” (26). Thomson himself explored the “dubious literary activity” in his essay “Bogus Gaelic Literature c. 1750 – c. 1820,” but all the listed categories could still be taken as directions for research in Scottish Gaelic studies.

Thomson also discussed Macpherson in his non-scholarly works, in pamphlets and educational materials he produced in his capacity of Gaelic activist. There are no contradictions in opinions or distortions of previously stated positions, but in contrast to his academic works, Thomson here tends to stress the positive aspects of Macpherson’s influence on the Gàidhealtachd and on Scotland as a whole.

In the booklet *Why Gaelic Matters* (1983), which was a publication for popular readership with the aim of strengthening the position of Gaelic in Scotland and boosting Scottish national awareness and self-confidence, Macpherson is mentioned in the brief overview of the history of Gaelic and Thomson sums the whole matter up in the following manner:

In the mid-eighteenth century, James Macpherson became aware of this strong tradition [of Gaelic ballads], added his own nationalistic interpretation to it, and published his supposed translations as *Fingal* and *Temora* (1761–3). He knew some of the Gaelic ballads and traditions, but invented some himself. His work had a wide-ranging influence on literary fashion at the time, and many European repercussions. (1983, 16)

One of the reasons behind Macpherson’s literary efforts was the desire to put Gaelic-speaking Scotland, poverty-stricken and downtrodden in the aftermath of the failed Jacobite rebellions, on the European culture map and to prove that it had an ancient literature and culture worth attention (see for example Stafford). In this, he partly succeeded, and Thomson recognises his importance in the history of Gaelic Scotland, as his publications kindled more interest in all things Gaelic and, perhaps for the first time, managed to make Gaelic Scotland, which was often deemed barbaric, backward, and politically unreliable by the British public and subject to severe post-Culloden repercussions, appealing and “cool” on the European level.

Thomson also wrote a portrait of Macpherson for the children’s publication *Ainmeil an Eachdraidh* (The Famous People of History) which he edited and published in 1997 at Gairm, a publishing venture attached to the seminal Gaelic quarterly of the same name that he founded and edited for fifty years. The book, according to the subtitle, presents the lives of twelve people who were famous: “ann an caochladh sheòrsachan eachdraidh, gu h-àraid an Albainn” [‘in different manners, especially in Scotland’]. It is an interesting medley and Macpherson got the honour to appear alongside his famous countrymen and countrywomen,

such as the inventor James Watt or the great Gaelic poet Mary Macpherson, and a rather random selection of non-Scottish worthies including Michael Faraday and Julius Caesar. The short volume was aimed at older school pupils and likely intended for use in teaching history and Gaelic.

Thomson's account of Macpherson in this children's book is still remarkably balanced, but the focus on the success of Macpherson's efforts and the European impact is even more pronounced than in *Why Gaelic Matters*. The article points out that not many Gaels in history achieved such fame and influence in their time as Macpherson. Thomson mentions the European Ossianic vogue at the time, the translations into various languages, including the more recent ones into Japanese and Russian, implying that the poetry still appeals to readers. He also stresses the fact that thanks to the uproar, more people started to collect old Gaelic poetry and folklore. Importantly, Thomson mentions the fact that he himself learnt nothing about Macpherson in school. The message of the article is that Macpherson created something successful and globally appealing, an immensely important part of the Romantic movement, and that it should be talked about, researched and taught, not ignored as an embarrassment.

3. Conclusion: Thomson's Continuing Relevance and Directions for Future Research

Derick Thomson's contributions to the debate remind us of a number of important points about the Ossian controversy that should be generally known, but regrettably are not: Gaelic Scotland has an old and rich literary tradition; the Ossianic tradition is genuine and existed long before Macpherson; it is well-attested in manuscripts and by later collectors; Macpherson was a native Gaelic speaker; he knew Gaelic traditions from his childhood in Badenoch and drew on existing ballads, but in his publications, he altered them to suit his own purposes and added his own writing to them. He had in his possession genuine old Gaelic manuscripts, some of which have been preserved to our times (and many thanks to his activities, as the Ossianic craze fired by Macpherson's publications persuaded people that old manuscripts had value) and some of which have been lost, so we will probably never get to know their actual contents.

In the Ossianic controversy, especially in the earlier stages although examples can be found even in the latter half of the 20th century, many contributors to the debate came with a pre-existing agenda. With Thomson, who was throughout his life a dedicated Gaelic revivalist and an ardent Scottish nationalist, so one could perhaps expect a certain bias and efforts to further the cause at the expense of research integrity, we find rigorous scholarship, balance, and level-headedness. Different aspects are underlined in Thomson's different contributions, but there are no contradictions and no sudden reversals.

He distinguishes three strains of research into Ossian: the enquiries revolving around authenticity, i.e. focusing on Macpherson's sources and the Gaelic tradition; the evaluation of the intrinsic merits of his publications as literature; and, lastly, the huge field of studies concerned with the impact in the fields of literature, fine arts, and music, literary criticism, folklore collecting, philosophy, and others. There are some directions Thomson indicated but did not pursue, and nowadays, for example with the developing theories of adaptation and translation, fan fiction studies, and other areas, we might be better equipped to do so. For Thomson, Ossian was both a deeply Gaelic and European matter, and there is still much both the public and the academic community can learn from the remarkable corpus of his Ossianic scholarship.

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Notes

- 1 One such example is Samuel Johnson himself, whose misguided opinions about various matters pertaining to Gaelic Scotland and its literature were corrected, with great passion and virulence, by the Gaelic-speaking Rev. Donald MacNicol, in his *Remarks on Dr Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Hebrides* (1779), described by Thomson as "a vigorous commentary, which is still full of interest, and which made Dr. Johnson 'growl hideously'" (1952, 7); or Thomas M. Curley, author of the recent deceptively respectable publication *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), which has been elegantly picked apart by Niall Mackenzie in *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 26 (Summer 2010): 146–154. Hugh Trevor-Roper's claims on the "invention of the Highland tradition," expressed in an essay included in the volume *The Invention of Tradition* (1983, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger), still seem to enjoy a good deal of popularity too.
- 2 The overview of Thomson's life and career is based on his autobiographical essays ("A Man Reared in Lewis" and "Some Recollections") and on Donald Meek's funerary oration and obituary for Thomson – all listed in References.
- 3 John Francis Campbell (Iain Frangan Caimbeul), also known by the Gaelic nickname Iain Òg Ìleach (1821–1885), was a Celticist, folklore collector and editor, traveller, barrister, courtier to Queen Victoria, and scientific inventor

with strong links to Islay. Apart from the four volumes of influential *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, he also wrote the study *The Celtic Dragon Myth* (1911) and published the 1872 edition of *Leabhar na Féinne*.

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