

The Poems of Ossian (1761-1763)



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For over a century the epic poems of 'Ossian', ancient Gaelic bard, 'discovered' and translated by James MacPherson between 1761 and 1763, exerted a powerful influence on international culture. Hailed as masterpieces of Gaelic lore, they were

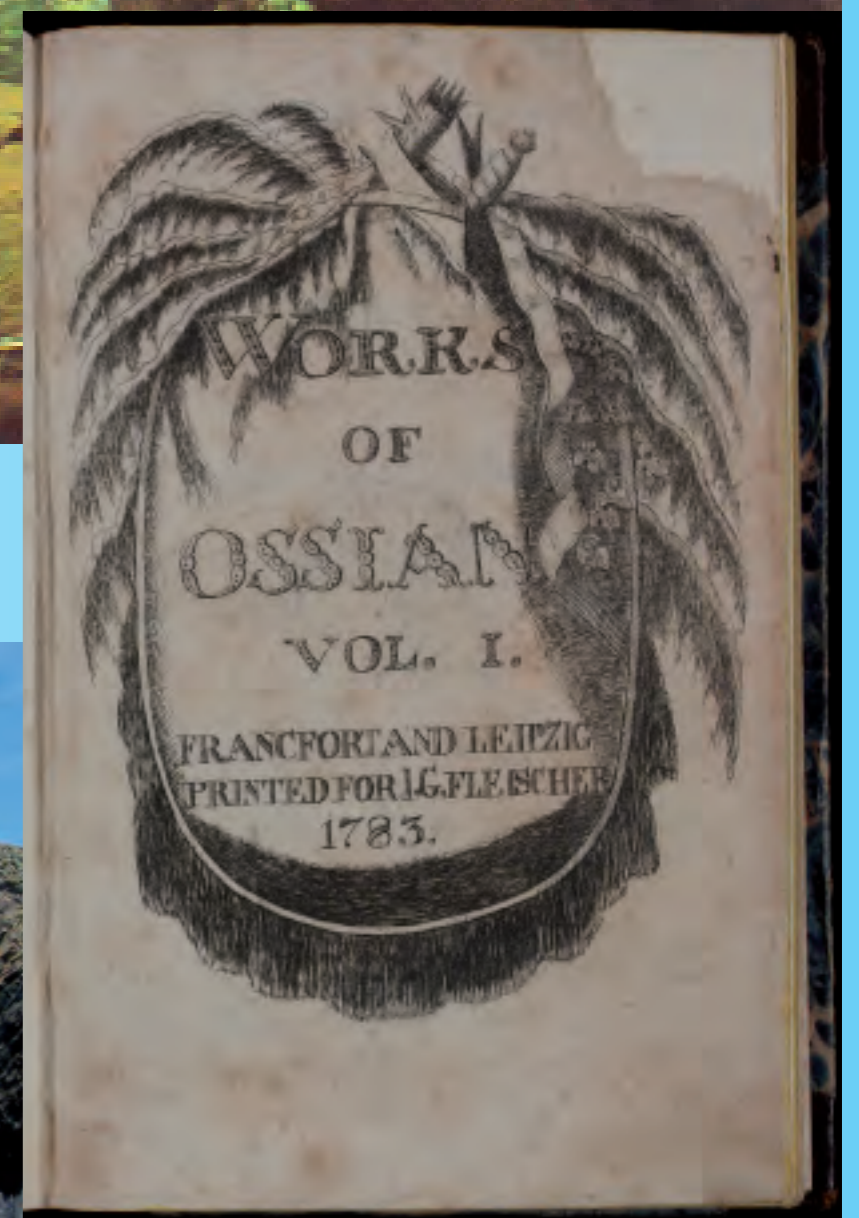
translated into several languages, inspired Goethe, Schiller, Henry Thoreau, Scott and Byron, and were the favourite reading of Napoleon. Sites associated with Ossian became major tourist destinations, while painters (Ingres) and classical composers (Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Schubert, Johannes Brahms) drew on the work to create visual and musical masterpieces.

James MacPherson, born in 1736 in Ruthven, Inverness-shire, came to prominence in 1760 with *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and translated from the Galic or Erse Language*. The poems provoked interest in what David Hume called these 'wild flowers' of Gaelic culture, and MacPherson and two associates were commissioned to gather more such material. The results were *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), purported translations of lost manuscripts of Ossian, third century makar and son of the Scottish king Fionn Mac Cumhaill (Finn or Fingal). In reality the epics were a creative combination of genuine Gaelic source material and Macpherson's own verse constructions.

Branded a forger after his death in 1796, Macpherson is now viewed as an opportunist who exploited contemporary interest in matters Scottish to publish creative reconstructions of Gaelic lore, so introducing an international readership to significant aspects of Scottish culture. Ossian remains one of the most influential texts of the Romantic period, affecting in equal measure contemporary writers, artists and composers who drank deeply and creatively of its powerful evocation of Gaelic culture.



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