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The Great Samuel Johnson and His Opposition to Literary Liars

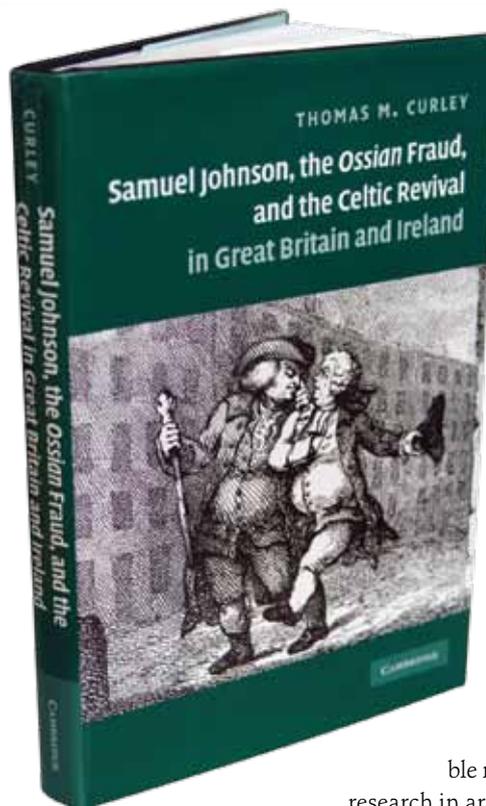
Thomas M. Curley



A close friend said of Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) that “no man had a more scrupulous regard for truth; from which, I verily believe, he would not have deviated to save his life.” No writer angered Johnson more than did James Macpherson (1736–1796) for perpetrating the most successful literary fraud in modern history. Macpherson’s notorious fraud, beginning in the 1760s, involved publishing his own made-up poems as translations of genuine Gaelic writings by an ancient Scots bard known as *Ossian*. This year marks the three-hundredth anniversary of Johnson’s birth, generating celebrations around the world and warranting here a close look at an episode of literary lying central to his career-long love of truth. My recent book from Cambridge University Press, entitled *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland* (2009), offers the fullest investigation of the hoax to date and includes a rare pamphlet against the *Ossian* deception written with the assistance of Johnson himself.

Johnson was possibly the greatest writer and the greatest heart in English literature. He was certainly England’s greatest moralist, greatest literary critic, and greatest dictionary-maker, whose *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755 was the first professional compilation of our vocabulary crucial to establishing English as the global lingua franca of modern times. An essential part of his massive achievement was his passion for truth-telling in literature and life. However difficult, however disturbing, the search for truth was the prime human necessity for a civilized society and became the principal theme of his writings. As he insisted, “There is no crime more infamous than the violation of truth. It is apparent that men can be social beings no longer than they believe each other.

When speech is employed as the vehicle of falsehood, every man must disunite himself from others, inhabit his own cave, and seek prey only for himself.” Because we see as through a glass darkly, frauds of any type only worsened the already clouded maze of human meaning with truth-seeming unrealities and consequently weakened trust in ourselves and others.



My interest in Johnson the English truth-teller and in Macpherson the Scottish literary liar began in graduate school at Harvard University and led to some early articles on the phony *Ossian* poems. When many years later I turned to preparing a book for publication by Cambridge University Press, I was surprised to find that my youthful scholarship on the *Ossian* fraud had provoked my own mini-controversy with revisionist academics bent on rehabilitating Macpherson’s dubious reputation and regarding him as an important “creative” author for his powerful impact on the literature of Europe and the United States. This development made me redou-

ble my efforts during a decade of field research in archives at England, Scotland, and Ireland funded by CART grants climaxing in a Presidential Fellowship at Bridgewater State College, in conjunction with awards from The National Endowment for the Humanities. I undertook a comprehensive survey of all *Ossian* scholarship over the past 250 years and made a painstaking evaluation of all the made-up *Ossian* poetry that Macpherson falsely claimed to have translated faithfully into English. I compared his spurious English work with authentic Gaelic verse, in consultation with Gaelic specialists. The result of my inquiries reads like a detective novel in

my book, uncovering layer after layer of sheer fabrication. As it turned out, Johnson rightly denounced Macpherson as an impostor in public, even at the risk of being challenged to a deadly duel on the streets of London. What follows is the little known story of their famous feud.

With the monumental exception of his *Lives of the English Poets*, Johnson's most notable literary undertaking in old age after his edition of Shakespeare was debunking Macpherson's hoax. Johnson's sense of the falsity of the *Ossian* works was correct, despite professions to the contrary by some modern scholars. Twenty-eight out of Macpherson's thirty-nine titles—72 percent of all the individual works comprising *Ossian*—have no apparent grounding in genuine Gaelic literature and are therefore entirely his own handiwork. The remaining 28 percent of the titles have but generally loose ties to approximately sixteen Gaelic ballads. Contrary to his assertions, Macpherson was no editor or translator of ancient poetry. He was the author of new, largely invented literature in violation of true history, legitimate Gaelic studies, and valid national identity in Scotland. As Johnson had charged, Macpherson committed literary fabrication.

The public response then and into modern times was enthusiastic. Why? Readers embraced the *Ossianic* craze believing that it offered them genuine antique novelty in an English dress. But they were actually indulging in the taste for sentimentalism and historical heroics found in contemporary poems and novels, in the grand style of popular melodrama, with the solemnity of English Bible rhetoric and the epic seriousness of Dryden's *Vergil* and Pope's *Homer*. What was behind the ruse? A logical explanation would be raw ambition firing a Highland lad, somewhat familiar with Gaelic, hungry for literary fame and fortune. Early in October of 1759, with an introduction from the Gaelic-speaking academic, Adam Ferguson, he talked about old Highland poems with John Home, author of a controversial play, *Douglas*. According to Home, "When Mr. Home desired to see them, Mr. Macpherson asked if he understood Gaelic. 'Not one word.' 'Then how can I show you them?' 'Very easily,' said Mr. Home, 'translate one of the poems which you think a good one, and I imagine that I shall be able to form some opinion of the

genius and character of the Gaelic poetry.'" Let it be carefully noted that Home's recollection of the very beginning of the *Ossian* fraud revolved around a request for faithful English translation of genuine Gaelic literature. It was a demand destined to elicit false assurances of its being fulfilled. Seven times in all the *Ossian* publications to come, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* of 1760 and the epics *Fingal* as well as *Temora Together with Several*

Other Poems in 1762 and 1763, there are hollow professions of having performed literal translation, when in fact most of the *Ossian* canon was Macpherson's creation. That is why Johnson wisely called for the Gaelic originals of *Ossian* so that experts could decipher the truth about the made-up version published in English. And he rightly suspected that no substantial Gaelic counterparts existed.

Macpherson's fabricating *Ossian* and then calling it true were bad enough. Equally discreditable was his concocting in 1771 a specious history book on early Scotland supporting his literary hoax.

Even worse was his contriving a Gaelic *Ossian* and then passing it off as the authentic original of his English "translations." Johnson from the first considered *Ossian* fraudulent and awful poetry. As his renowned biographer, James Boswell, noted, "Johnson had all along denied their authenticity; and, what was still more provoking to their admirers, maintained they had no merit. . . . Dr. [Hugh] Blair [the foremost defender of *Ossian*] asked Dr. Johnson whether he thought any man of a modern age could have written such poems? Johnson replied, 'Yes, Sir, many men, many women, and many children.'" More noteworthy is a record of Johnson's only face-to-face encounter with Macpherson: Macpherson in 1764 "fell in company with Mr. Johnson, who put to him several questions relating to his publications: he answered each of Mr. Johnson's questions with a short, round assertion; but he got off from the subject as soon as he could; & turned the discourse to something else."



Samuel Johnson in Scotland.

Johnson did not let him off the hook. Famous for rock-solid integrity, Johnson went to Scotland in 1773 partly in search of *Ossian's* authenticity. He made public his well-taken skepticism in his classic travel book, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* in 1775: "I suppose my opinion of the poems of *Ossian* is already discovered. I believe they never existed in any other form than that which we have seen. [Macpherson] has doubtless inserted names that circulate in popular stories, and may have translated some wandering ballads, if any can be found; and the names, and some of the images being recollected, make an inaccurate auditor imagine, by the help of Caledonian bigotry, that he has formerly heard the whole." This was correct, even though Johnson elsewhere made many mistakes about the amount, age, and quality of genuine Gaelic verse and the durability of oral tradition. The misguided Scottish defenders of *Ossian* received Johnson's rebuke in the *Journey*, "A Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist, who does not love Scotland better than truth." Johnson's criticism provoked a foolish challenge to a duel from hotheaded James Macpherson.

Macpherson was stung to the quick and allowed himself to be swept up in an embarrassing confrontation that has come to rank as "one of the most famous minor episodes in literary history," according to the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Johnson, Walter Jackson Bate. Surprisingly, this celebrated conflict has come under critical fire as mere myth manipulated by sympathetic commentators to aggrandize Johnson's fame and discredit his Scottish foe. The facts of the case, disclosed here for the first time, contradict this modern misreading of the past. Some time around the *Journey's* distribution to booksellers on 13 January 1775 and before the announcement of its publication on 18 January, Macpherson got wind of offending passages, accusing him of insolence, arrogance, and guilt in imposing a false *Ossian* on a credulous readership: "The editor, or author, never could shew the original; nor can it be shewn by any other; to revenge reasonable incredulity, by refusing evidence, is a degree of insolence, with which the world is not yet acquainted; and stubborn audacity is the last refuge of guilt." These fighting words, taunting Macpherson to do the impossible and reveal nonexistent Gaelic originals behind his pretended translations, ensured an immediate response at the very time when Macpherson planned to publish a two-volume history of modern Britain under William Strahan, the same London-based Scottish publisher who brought out Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* criticizing *Ossian*. Macpherson's credibility lay wide open to merciless ridicule.

True to his surly disposition, he commenced a barely civil correspondence with Johnson in the expectation of securing a retraction under the implicit threat of harsh retribution. The formal language of a challenge to a duel comes through clearly, with studied coolness. In such a mood on 15 January Macpherson directed Strahan in writing to mediate a change to less provocative language in the *Journey* by "that impertinent fellow" and enclosed for Johnson's possible reading a note, in which the following threat appears under a polite guise: "But I suppose you will agree with me, that such expressions ought not be used by one gentleman to another; and that whenever they are used, they cannot be passed over with impunity. To prevent consequences that may be, at once, disagreeable to Dr Johnson and to myself, I desire the favour that you will wait upon him, and tell him that I expect he will cancel from his *Journey* the injurious expressions." He contacted Strahan yet again in an angrier vein, perhaps with growing impatience for some response. Were it not for the need to avoid spoiling current publication plans, Macpherson informed Strahan, "I should before this time have traced out the author of this journey, in a very effectual manner. Unless I have a satisfactory answer, I am determined (indeed, it is necessary) to bring that business to a conclusion before I begin any other." With this new letter Macpherson submitted an example of the kind of "advertisement" of apology wanted from Johnson. This ghostwritten advertisement had Johnson denying any intention to give personal offence and agreeing to the deletion of obnoxious words in a "second impression" of the *Journey*. On 17 January Strahan promised to extract the requested apology from Johnson pronto.

Of utmost importance, on the next day, 18 January, Strahan confirmed that Johnson was the first of the belligerents to take a decisive step for ending the dispute: "I have seen Dr Johnson. He declares under his Hand to me, that he meant no personal affront to you, and we shall take care that exceptionable Words shall be left out in all future Editions, the present ones being already too dispersed to admit of Alteration. He says it is not to Temora but to Fingall he makes Objections." This previously unknown disclosure of Johnson's peace-making gesture, tantamount to an apology, sheds crucial new light on the primary instigator of the dispute, once the *Journey* became public property. The troublemaker now was not Johnson. If Strahan is to be believed, Johnson denied that his object was to malign Macpherson, when the principal purpose, after all, was exposing *Ossian*. He let it be known that he still doubted the largely made-up epic poem, *Fingal*, but, strictly speaking, had not inquired about the equally made-up epic, *Temora*, and therefore could say nothing about it conclusively. In addition, Strahan with Johnson's

backing promised to excise offensive language in all future editions.

This acknowledgement might have appeased Macpherson, were it not for Strahan's failure to fulfil the accommodation. There was only a private assurance of Johnson's non-malicious intent but not the public advertisement of a removal of offensive words that Macpherson demanded in a "second impression" of the *Journey*. Even worse, it was impossible for Strahan to have sanitized a second printing, because it was already on its way into the public domain and beyond alteration. Strahan seems to have deviously communicated concessions that he could not carry out. The damage done to Macpherson's reputation had no remedy, and an explosion was inevitable, owing perhaps to bad-faith bargaining on Strahan's part.

We do not have the one important final note from Macpherson causing the explosion. The evidence points to an offensive letter of defiance, using again the style of a challenge to a duel found in Macpherson's earlier communications to Strahan. There is the testimony of a William Duncan: "I was the bearer...of a letter of challenge [Macpherson] wrote to the late Dr Samuel Johnson." Second, Johnson himself bore witness to Macpherson's "intimidating me by noise and threats." Third, a letter in the National Library of Scotland elaborated on the threats: "Mr. Macpherson tells the Dr. that after his having obstinately shut his eyes against any species of conviction with regard to the authenticity of the Poems, he thinks himself at liberty to load the Dr. with the most opprobrious epithets; since the Dr.'s age & infirmities debar Mr. Macpherson from demanding the satisfaction of a Gentleman, for the impeachment of impositions, which Dr. Johnson has thrown on him." This affront caused a self-respecting man like Johnson to grab a truncheon and reply by stern letter how well he could take care of himself against abuse from a lying fool. In his famous letter of defiance on January 20, 1775, he disparaged Macpherson as a "Ruffian," defined in his *Dictionary* as a brutal, boisterous, mischievous fellow; a cut-throat; a robber; a murderer: "Mr. James Macpherson—I received your foolish and impudent note. Whatever insult is offered me I will do my best to repel, and what I cannot do for myself the law will do for me. I will not desist from detecting what I think a cheat, from any fear of the menaces of a Ruffian."

What happened when Johnson defied Macpherson to make good his threats and promises of authentication? Nothing. He backed down from further controversy, although he fought a nasty rear-guard action of retaliation through other writers. To do Johnson justice, his presumption of *Ossianic* fraud stood the test of time. But life is not fair. Macpherson died a rich man, unrepentantly bequeathing money for a phony Gaelic *Ossian* in 1807 to authenticate his phony English work. The

proud Scotsman bought himself a burial site in Westminster Abbey, but the proud Englishman earned his resting-place there. On one side of the sanctuary lies the foremost practitioner of poetic falsehood in modern history, and on the other side, also in The Poets' Corner, lies England's supreme moralist and critic, a good and great man who so memorably defended truth in life and literature.

—A professor of English at Bridgewater State College, Tom Curley has published several books and articles on eighteenth-century literature, most notably *Sir Robert Chambers: Law, Literature, and Empire in the Age of Johnson (1998)*, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in biography and winner of the *Choice Outstanding Academic Book Award*. His most recent book, *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland (2009)*, was published by Cambridge University Press on the occasion of the tercentenary of Samuel Johnson's birth. This article for *The Bridgewater Review* is adapted from a paper delivered at the international Johnson at 300 Conference at Pembroke College (Johnson's college), Oxford University, in September of 2009.