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Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, In Six Books

Macpherson, James

London, 1762

Preface.

urn:nbn:de:gbv:45:1-2056

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THE love of novelty, which, in some degree, is common to all mankind, is more particularly the characteristic of that mediocrity of parts, which distinguishes more than one half of the human species. This inconstant disposition is never more conspicuous, than in what regards the article of amusement. We change our sentiments concerning it every moment, and the distance between our admiration and extreme contempt, is so very small, that the one is almost a sure presage of the other. The poets, whose business it is to please, if they want to preserve the fame they have once acquired, must very often forfeit their own judgments to this variable temper of the bulk of their readers, and accommodate their writings to this unsettled taste. A fame so fluctuating deserves not to be much valued.

POETRY, like virtue, receives its reward after death. The fame which men pursued in vain, when living, is often bestowed upon them when they are not sensible of it. This neglect of living authors is not altogether to be attributed to that reluctance which men shew in praising and rewarding genius. It often happens, that



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the man who writes differs greatly from the same man in common life. His foibles, however, are obliterated by death, and his better part, his writings, remain: his character is formed from them, and he that was no extraordinary man in his own time, becomes the wonder of succeeding ages.—From this source proceeds our veneration for the dead. Their virtues remain, but the vices, which were once blended with their virtues, have died with themselves.

THIS consideration might induce a man, diffident of his abilities, to ascribe his own compositions to a person, whose remote antiquity and whose situation, when alive, might well answer for faults which would be inexcusable in a writer of this age. An ingenious gentleman made this observation, before he knew any thing but the name of the epic poem, which is printed in the following collection. When he had read it, his sentiments were changed. He found it abounded too much with those ideas, that only belong to the most early state of society, to be the work of a modern poet. Of this, I am persuaded, the public will be as thoroughly convinced, as this gentleman was, when they shall see the poems; and that some will think, notwithstanding the disadvantages with which the works ascribed to Ossian appear, it would be a very uncommon instance of self-denial in me to disown them, were they really of my composition.

I WOULD not have dwelt so long upon this subject, especially as I have answered all reasonable objections to the genuineness of the poems in the Dissertation, were it not on account of the prejudices of the present age against the ancient inhabitants of Britain, who are thought to have been incapable of the generous sentiments to be met with in the poems of Ossian.—If we err in praising too much the times of our forefathers, it is also as repugnant to good sense,

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to be altogether blind to the imperfections of our own. If our fathers had not so much wealth, they had certainly fewer vices than the present age. Their tables, it is true, were not so well provided, neither were their beds so soft as those of modern times; and this, in the eyes of men who place their ultimate happiness in those conveniences of life, gives us a great advantage over them. I shall not enter farther into this subject, but only observe, that the general poverty of a nation has not the same influence, that the indigence of individuals, in an opulent country, has, upon the manners of the community. The idea of meanness, which is now connected with a narrow fortune, had its rise after commerce had thrown too much property into the hands of a few; for the poorer sort, imitating the vices of the rich, were obliged to have recourse to roguery and circumvention, in order to supply their extravagance, so that they were, not without reason, reckoned, in more than one sense, the worst of the people.

IT is now two years since the first translations from the Galic language were handed about among people of taste in Scotland. They became at last so much corrupted, through the carelessness of transcribers, that, for my own sake, I was obliged to print the genuine copies. Some other pieces were added, to swell the publication into a pamphlet, which was entitled, Fragments of Ancient Poetry.—The Fragments, upon their first appearance, were so much approved of, that several people of rank, as well as taste, prevailed with me to make a journey into the Highlands and western isles, in order to recover what remained of the works of the old bards, especially those of Ossian, the son of Fingal, who was the best, as well as most ancient, of those who are celebrated in tradition for their poetical genius.—I undertook this journey, more from a desire

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of complying with the request of my friends, than from any hopes I had of answering their expectations. I was not unsuccessful, considering how much the compositions of ancient times have been neglected, for some time past, in the north of Scotland. Several gentlemen in the Highlands and isles generously gave me all the assistance in their power; and it was by their means I was enabled to compleat the epic poem. How far it comes up to the rules of the epopæa, is the province of criticism to examine. It is only my business to lay it before the reader, as I have found it. As it is one of the chief beauties of composition, to be well understood, I shall here give the story of the poem, to prevent that obscurity which the introduction of characters utterly unknown might occasion.

ARTHO, supreme king of Ireland, dying at Temora the royal palace of the Irish kings, was succeeded by Cormac, his son, a minor. Cuchullin, the son of Semo, lord of the *Isle of Mist*, one of the Hebrides, being at that time in Ulster, and very famous for his great exploits, was, in a convention of the petty kings and heads of tribes assembled for that purpose at Temora, unanimously chosen guardian to the young king.—He had not managed the affairs of Cormac long, when news was brought, that Swaran, the son of Starno, king of Lochlin, or Scandinavia, intended to invade Ireland. Cuchullin immediately dispatched Munan, the son of Stirmal, an Irish chief, to Fingal, king of those Caledonians who inhabited the western coast of Scotland, to implore his aid. Fingal, as well from a principle of generosity, as from his connection with the royal family of Ireland, resolved on an expedition into that country; but before his arrival, the enemy had landed in Ulster.—Cuchullin in the meantime had gathered the flower of the Irish tribes to Tura, a castle of
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Ulster, and dispatched scouts along the coast, to give the most early intelligence of the enemy.—Such is the situation of affairs, when the poem opens.

CUCHULLIN, sitting alone beneath a tree, at the gate of Tura, ^{Fing. B. I.} for the other chiefs had gone on a hunting party to Cromla, a neighbouring hill, is informed of Swaran's landing by Moran, the son of Fithil, one of his scouts. He convenes the chiefs; a council is held, and disputes run high about giving battle to the enemy. Connal, the petty king of Togorma, and an intimate friend of Cuchullin, was for retreating till Fingal should arrive; but Calmar, the son of Matha, lord of Lara, a country in Connaught, was for engaging the enemy immediately.—Cuchullin, of himself willing to fight, went into the opinion of Calmar. Marching towards the enemy, he missed three of his bravest heroes, Fergus, Duchomar, and Caithbat. Fergus arriving, tells Cuchullin of the death of the two other chiefs; which introduces the affecting episode of Morna, the daughter of Cormac—The army of Cuchullin is descried at a distance by Swaran, who sent the son of Arno to observe the motions of the enemy, while he himself ranged his forces in order of battle.—The son of Arno returning to Swaran, describes to him Cuchullin's chariot, and the terrible appearance of that hero. The armies engage, but night coming on, leaves the victory undecided. Cuchullin, according to the hospitality of the times, sends to Swaran a formal invitation to a feast, by his bard Carril, the son of Kinfena.—Swaran refuses to come. Carril relates to Cuchullin the story of Grudar and Braffolis. A party, by Connal's advice, is sent to observe the enemy; which closes the action of the first day.



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B. II.

THE ghost of Crugal, one of the Irish heroes who was killed in battle, appearing to Connal, foretels the defeat of Cuchullin in the next battle; and earnestly advises him to make peace with Swaran. Connal communicates the vision; but Cuchullin is inflexible from a principle of honour that he would not be the first to sue for peace, and resolved to continue the war. Morning comes; Swaran proposes dishonourable terms to Cuchullin, which are rejected. The battle begins, and is obstinately fought for some time, until, upon the flight of Grumal, the whole Irish army gave way. Cuchullin and Connal cover their retreat: Carril leads them to a neighbouring hill, whither they are soon followed by Cuchullin himself, who descries the fleet of Fingal making towards the coast; but, night coming on, he lost sight of it again. Cuchullin, dejected after his defeat, attributes his ill success to the death of Ferda his friend, whom he had killed some time before. Carril, to shew that ill success did not always attend those who innocently killed their friends, introduces the episode of Comal and Galvina.

B. III.

CUCHULLIN, pleased with Carril's story, insists with him for more of his songs. The bard relates the actions of Fingal in Lochlin, and death of Agandecca the beautiful sister of Swaran. He had scarce finished when Calmar the son of Matha, who had advised the first battle, came wounded from the field, and told them of Swaran's design to surprize the remains of the Irish army. He himself proposes to withstand singly the whole force of the enemy, in a narrow pass, till the Irish should make good their retreat. Cuchullin, touched with the gallant proposal of Calmar, resolves to accompany him, and orders Carril to carry off the few that remained of the Irish. Morning comes, Calmar dies of his wounds; and, the ships of the Caledonians appearing, Swaran gives over the pursuit of the Irish, and returns



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turns to oppose Fingal's landing. Cuchullin ashamed, after his defeat, to appear before Fingal, retires to the cave of Tura. Fingal engages the enemy, puts them to flight; but the coming on of night makes the victory not decisive. The king, who had observed the gallant behaviour of his grandson Oscar, gives him advices concerning his conduct in peace and war. He recommends to him to place the example of his fathers before his eyes, as the best model for his conduct; which introduces the episode concerning Fainasól-lis, the daughter of the king of Craca, whom Fingal had taken under his protection, in his youth. Fillan and Oscar are dispatched to observe the motions of the enemy by night; Gaul the son of Morni desires the command of the army, in the next battle; which Fingal promises to give him. The song of the bards closes the third day.

THE action of the poem being suspended by night, Ossian takes that B. IV. opportunity to relate his own actions at the lake of Lego, and his courtship of Evirallin, who was the mother of Oscar, and had died some time before the expedition of Fingal into Ireland. Her ghost appears to him, and tells him that Oscar, who had been sent, the beginning of the night, to observe the enemy, was engaged with an advanced party, and almost overpowered. Ossian relieves his son; and an alarm is given to Fingal of the approach of Swaran. The king rises, calls his army together, and, as he had promised the preceding night, devolves the command on Gaul the son of Morni, while he himself, after charging his sons to behave gallantly and defend his people, retires to a hill, from whence he could have a view of the battle. The battle joins; the poet relates Oscar's great actions. But when Oscar, in conjunction with his father, conquered in one wing, Gaul, who was attacked by Swaran in person,



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was on the point of retreating in the other. Fingal sends Ullin his bard to encourage him with a war song, but notwithstanding Swaran prevails; and Gaul and his army are obliged to give way. Fingal, descending from the hill, rallies them again: Swaran desists from the pursuit, possesses himself of a rising ground, restores the ranks, and waits the approach of Fingal. The king, having encouraged his men, gives the necessary orders, and renews the battle. Cuchullin, who, with his friend Connal, and Carril his bard, had retired to the cave of Tura, hearing the noise, came to the brow of the hill, which overlooked the field of battle, where he saw Fingal engaged with the enemy. He, being hindered by Connal from joining Fingal, who was himself upon the point of obtaining a complete victory, sends Carril to congratulate that hero on his success.

B. V. IN the mean time Fingal and Swaran meet; the combat is described: Swaran is overcome, bound and delivered over as a prisoner to the care of Ossian and Gaul the son of Morni; Fingal, his younger sons, and Oscar, still pursue the enemy. The episode of Orla a chief of Lochlin, who was mortally wounded in the battle, is introduced. Fingal, touched with the death of Orla, orders the pursuit to be discontinued; and calling his sons together, he is informed that Ryno, the youngest of them, was killed. He laments his death, hears the story of Lamdarg and Gelchoffa, and returns towards the place where he had left Swaran. Carril, who had been sent by Cuchullin to congratulate Fingal on his victory, comes in the mean time to Ossian. The conversation of the two poets closes the action of the fourth day.

B. VI. NIGHT comes on. Fingal gives a feast to his army, at which Swaran is present. The king commands Ullin his bard to give the
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song of peace; a custom always observed at the end of a war. Ullin relates the actions of Trenmor, great grandfather to Fingal, in Scandinavia, and his marriage with Inibaca, the daughter of a king of Lochlin who was ancestor to Swaran; which consideration, together with his being brother to Agandecca, with whom Fingal was in love in his youth, induced the king to release him, and permit him to return, with the remains of his army, into Lochlin, upon his promise of never returning to Ireland, in a hostile manner. The night is spent in settling Swaran's departure, in songs of bards, and in a conversation in which the story of Grumal is introduced by Fingal. Morning comes. Swaran departs; Fingal goes on a hunting party, and finding Cuchullin in the cave of Tura, comforts him, and sets sail, the next day, for Scotland; which concludes the poem.

THE story of this poem is so little interlarded with fable, that one cannot help thinking it the genuine history of Fingal's expedition, embellished by poetry. In that case, the compositions of Ossian are not less valuable for the light they throw on the ancient state of Scotland and Ireland than they are for their poetical merit. Succeeding generations founded on them all their traditions concerning that period; and they magnified or varied them, in proportion as they were swayed by credulity or design. The bards of Ireland, by ascribing to Ossian compositions which are evidently their own, have occasioned a general belief, in that country, that Fingal was of Irish extraction, and not of the ancient Caledonians, as is said in the genuine poems of Ossian. The inconsistencies between those spurious pieces prove the ignorance of their authors. In one of them Ossian is made to mention himself as baptised by St. Patrick, in another he speaks of the famous crusade, which was not begun in Europe for many centuries after.

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THOUGH this anachronism quite destroys the authority of the bards with respect to Fingal; yet their desire to make him their countryman shews how famous he was in Ireland as well as in the north of Scotland.

HAD the Senachies of Ireland been as well acquainted with the antiquities of their nation as they pretended, they might derive as much honour from Fingal's being a Caledonian, as if he had been an Irishman; for both nations were almost the same people in the days of that hero. The Celtæ, who inhabited Britain and Ireland before the invasion of the Romans, though they were divided into numerous tribes, yet, as the same language and customs, and the memory of their common origin remained among them, they considered themselves as one nation. After South Britain became a province of Rome, and its inhabitants begun to adopt the language and customs of their conquerors, the Celtæ beyond the pale of the empire, considered them as a distinct people, and consequently treated them as enemies. On the other hand, the strictest amity subsisted between the Irish and Scots Celtæ for many ages, and the customs and ancient language of both still remaining, leave no room to doubt that they were of old one and the same nation.

IT was at first intended to prefix to Ossian's poems a discourse concerning the ancient inhabitants of Britain; but as a gentleman, in the north of Scotland, who has thoroughly examined the antiquities of this island, and is perfectly acquainted with all the branches of the Celtic tongue, is just now preparing for the press a work on that subject, the curious are referred to it.

