

Landesbibliothek Oldenburg

Digitalisierung von Drucken

Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, In Six Books

Macpherson, James

London, 1762

A Dissertation concerning the Antiquity, &c. of the Poems of Ossian the
Son of Fingal.

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

A

DISSERTATION

CONCERNING THE

ANTIQUITY, &c. of the POEMS of

OSSIAN the Son of FINGAL.

INQUIRIES into the antiquities of nations afford more pleasure than any real advantage to mankind. The ingenious may form systems of history on probabilities and a few facts; but at a great distance of time, their accounts must be vague and uncertain. The infancy of states and kingdoms is as destitute of great events, as of the means of transmitting them to posterity. The arts of polished life, by which alone facts can be preserved with certainty, are the production of a well formed community. It is then historians begin to write, and public transactions to be worthy remembrance. The actions of former times are left in obscurity, or magnified by uncertain traditions. Hence it is that we find so much of the marvellous in the origin of every nation; posterity being always ready to believe any thing, however fabulous, that reflects honour on their ancestors. The Greeks and Romans were remarkable for this weakness. They swallowed the most absurd fables concerning the high antiquities of their respective nations. Good historians, however, rose very early
a amongst



amongst them, and transmitted, with lustre, their great actions to posterity. It is to them that they owe that unrivalled fame they now enjoy, while the great actions of other nations are involved in fables, or lost in obscurity. The Celtic nations afford a striking instance of this kind. They, though once the masters of Europe from the mouth of the river Oby, in Russia, to Cape Finistere, the western point of Galicia in Spain, are very little mentioned in history. They trusted their fame to tradition and the songs of their bards, which, by the vicissitude of human affairs, are long since lost. Their ancient language is the only monument that remains of them; and the traces of it being found in places so widely distant of each other, serves only to shew the extent of their ancient power, but throws very little light on their history.

Plin. l. 6.

Cæf. l. 5.
Tac. Agric.
l. 1. c. 2.

Cæfar.
Pomp. Mel.
Tacitus.

OF all the Celtic nations, that which possessed old Gaul is the most renowned; not perhaps on account of worth superior to the rest, but for their wars with a people who had historians to transmit the fame of their enemies, as well as their own, to posterity. Britain was first peopled by them, according to the testimony of the best authors; its situation in respect to Gaul makes the opinion probable; but what puts it beyond all dispute, is that the same customs and language prevailed among the inhabitants of both in the days of Julius Cæsar.

THE colony from Gaul possessed themselves, at first, of that part of Britain which was next to their own country; and spreading northward, by degrees, as they increased in numbers, peopled the whole island. Some adventurers passing over from those parts of Britain that are within sight of Ireland, were the founders of the Irish nation: which is a more probable story than the idle fables of Milesian and Gallician colonies. Diodorus Siculus mentions it as a thing

thing well known in his time, that the inhabitants of Ireland were originally Britons; and his testimony is unquestionable, when we consider that, for many ages, the language and customs of both nations were the same.

TACITUS was of opinion that the ancient Caledonians were of German extract. By the language and customs which always prevailed in the North of Scotland, and which are undoubtedly Celtic, one would be tempted to differ in opinion from that celebrated writer. The Germans, properly so called, were not the same with the ancient Celtæ. The manners and customs of the two nations were similar; but their language different. The Germans are the genuine descendants of the ancient Dacæ, afterwards well known by the name of Daci, and passed originally into Europe by the way of the northern countries, and settled beyond the Danube, towards the vast regions of Transilvania, Wallachia, and Moldavia; and from thence advanced by degrees into Germany. The Celtæ, it is certain, sent many Colonies into that country, all of whom retained their own laws, language, and customs; and it is of them, if any colonies came from Germany into Scotland, that the ancient Caledonians were descended.

BUT whether the Caledonians were a colony of the Celtic Germans, or the same with the Gauls that first possessed themselves of Britain, is a matter of no moment at this distance of time. Whatever their origin was, we find them very numerous in the time of Julius Agricola, which is a presumption that they were long before settled in the country. The form of their government was a mixture of aristocracy and monarchy, as it was in all the countries where the Druids bore the chief sway. This order of men seems to have been formed on the same system with the Dactyli Idæi and Curetes.



of the ancients. Their pretended intercourse with heaven, their magic and divination were the same. The knowledge of the Druids in natural causes, and the properties of certain things, the fruit of the experiments of ages gained them a mighty reputation among the people. The esteem of the populace soon increased into a veneration for the order; which a cunning and ambitious tribe of men took care to improve, to such a degree, that they, in a manner, ingrossed the management of civil, as well as religious, matters. It is generally allowed that they did not abuse this extraordinary power; the preserving their character of sanctity was so essential to their influence, that they never broke out into violence or oppression. The chiefs were allowed to execute the laws, but the legislative power was entirely in the hands of the Druids. It was by their authority that the tribes were united, in times of the greatest danger, under one head. This temporary king, or Vergobretus, was chosen by them, and generally laid down his office at the end of the war. These priests enjoyed long this extraordinary privilege among the Celtic nations who lay beyond the pale of the Roman empire. It was in the beginning of the second century that their power among the Caledonians began to decline. The poems that celebrate Trathal and Cormac, ancestors to Fingal, are full of particulars concerning the fall of the Druids, which account for the total silence concerning their religion in the poems that are now given to the public.

Cæf. 1. 6.

Fer-gu-
breth, *the*
man to judge.

THE continual wars of the Caledonians against the Romans hindered the nobility from initiating themselves, as the custom formerly was, into the order of the Druids. The precepts of their religion were confined to a few, and were not much attended to by a people inured to war. The Vergobretus, or chief magistrate, was chosen without the concurrence of the hierarchy, or continued in his office against their will. Continual power strengthened his interest

terest among the tribes, and enabled him to send down, as hereditary to his posterity, the office he had only received himself by election.

On occasion of a new war against the *King of the World*, as the poems emphatically call the Roman emperor, the Druids, to vindicate the honour of the order, began to resume their ancient privilege of chusing the Vergobretus. Garmal, the son of Tarno, being deputed by them, came to the grandfather of the celebrated Fingal, who was then Vergobretus, and commanded him, in the name of the whole order, to lay down his office. Upon his refusal, a civil war commenced, which soon ended in almost the total extinction of the religious order of the Druids. A few that remained, retired to the dark recesses of their groves, and the caves they had formerly used for their meditations. It is then we find them in *the circle of stones*, and unheeded by the world. A total disregard for the order, and utter abhorrence of the Druidical rites ensued. Under this cloud of public hate, all that had any knowledge of the religion of the Druids became extinct, and the nation fell into the last degree of ignorance of their rites and ceremonies.

IT is no matter of wonder then, that Fingal and his son Ossian make so little, if any, mention of the Druids, who were the declared enemies to their succession in the supreme magistracy. It is a singular case, it must be allowed, that there are no traces of religion in the poems ascribed to Ossian; as the poetical compositions of other nations are so closely connected with their mythology. It is hard to account for it to those who are not made acquainted with the manner of the old Scottish bards. That race of men carried their notions of martial honour to an extravagant pitch. Any aid given their heroes in battle, was thought to derogate from their fame; and the bards
imme-



immediately transferred the glory of the action to him who had given that aid.

HAD Ossian brought down gods, as often as Homer hath done, to assist his heroes, this poem had not consisted of elogiums on his friends, but of hymns to these superior beings. To this day, those that write in the Galic language seldom mention religion in their profane poetry; and when they professedly write of religion, they never interlard with their compositions, the actions of their heroes. This custom alone, even though the religion of the Druids had not been previously extinguished, may, in some measure, account for Ossian's silence concerning the religion of his own times.

To say, that a nation is void of all religion, is the same thing as to say, that it does not consist of people endued with reason. The traditions of their fathers, and their own observations on the works of nature, together with that superstition which is inherent in the human frame, have, in all ages, raised in the minds of men some idea of a superior being.—Hence it is, that in the darkest times, and amongst the most barbarous nations, the very populace themselves had some faint notion, at least, of a divinity. It would be doing injustice to Ossian, who, upon no occasion, shews a narrow mind, to think, that he had not opened his conceptions to that primitive and greatest of all truths. But let Ossian's religion be what it will, it is certain he had no knowledge of Christianity, as there is not the least allusion to it, or any of its rites, in his poems; which absolutely fixes him to an æra prior to the introduction of that religion. The persecution begun by Dioclesian, in the year 303, is the most probable time in which the first dawning of Christianity in the north of Britain can be fixed.—The humane and mild character of Constantius Chlorus, who commanded then in
Britain,

ANTIQUITIES, &c. of OSSIAN'S POEMS.

vii

Britain, induced the persecuted Christians to take refuge under him. Some of them, through a zeal to propagate their tenets, or through fear, went beyond the pale of the Roman empire, and settled among the Caledonians; who were the more ready to hearken to their doctrines, as the religion of the Druids had been exploded so long before.

THESE missionaries, either through choice, or to give more weight to the doctrine they advanced, took possession of the cells and groves of the Druids; and it was from this retired life they had the name of *Culdees*, which in the language of the country signified *Culdich*, *sequestered persons*. It was with one of the *Culdees* that Ossian, in his extreme old age, is said to have disputed concerning the Christian religion. This dispute is still extant, and is couched in verse, according to the custom of the times. The extreme ignorance on the part of Ossian, of the Christian tenets, shews, that that religion had only been lately introduced, as it is not easy to conceive, how one of the first rank could be totally unacquainted with a religion that had been known for any time in the country. The dispute bears the genuine marks of antiquity. The obsolete phrases and expressions peculiar to the times, prove it to be no forgery. If Ossian then lived at the introduction of Christianity, as by all appearance he did, his epoch will be the latter end of the third, and beginning of the fourth century. What puts this point beyond dispute, is the allusion in his poems to the history of the times.

THE exploits of Fingal against Caracul, the son of the *King of the Carac'huil, World*, are among the first brave actions of his youth. A complete ^{terrible eye.} poem, which relates to this subject, is printed in this collection.

IN



IN the year 210 the emperor Severus, after returning from his expeditions against the Caledonians, at York fell into the tedious illness of which he afterwards died. The Caledonians and Maiata, resuming courage from his indisposition, took arms in order to recover the possessions they had lost. The enraged emperor commanded his army to march into their country, and to destroy it with fire and sword. His orders were but ill executed, for his son, Caracalla, was at the head of the army, and his thoughts were entirely taken up with the hopes of his father's death, and with schemes to supplant his brother Geta.—He scarcely had entered the enemy's country, when news was brought him that Severus was dead.—A sudden peace is patched up with the Caledonians, and, as it appears from Dion Cassius, the country they had lost to Severus was restored to them.

THE Caracul of Fingal is no other than Caracalla, who, as the son of Severus, the Emperor of Rome, whose dominions were extended almost over the known world, was not without reason called in the poems of Ossian, *the Son of the King of the World*. The space of time between 211, the year Severus died, and the beginning of the fourth century, is not so great, but Ossian the son of Fingal, might have seen the Christians whom the persecution under Dioclesian had driven beyond the pale of the Roman empire.

OSSIAN, in one of his many lamentations on the death of his beloved son Oscar, mentions among his great actions, a battle which he fought against Caros, king of ships, on the banks of the winding Carun. It is more than probable, that the Caros mentioned here, is the same with the noted usurper Carausius, who assumed the purple in the year 287, and seizing on Britain, defeated the emperor Maximian Herculius, in several naval engagements, which gives propriety to his

Car-avon,
winding ri-
ver.



his being called in Ossian's poems, *the King of Ships*. The winding *Carun* is that small river retaining still the name of Carron, and runs in the neighbourhood of Agricola's wall, which Carausius repaired to obstruct the incursions of the Caledonians. Several other passages in the poems allude to the wars of the Romans; but the two just mentioned clearly fix the epoch of Fingal to the third century; and this account agrees exactly with the Irish histories, which place the death of Fingal, the son of Comhal, in the year 283, and that of Osear and their own celebrated Cairbre, in the year 296.

SOME people may imagine, that the allusions to the Roman history might have been industriously inserted into the poems, to give them the appearance of antiquity. This fraud must then have been committed at least three ages ago, as the passages in which the allusions are made, are alluded to often in the compositions of those times.

EVERY one knows what a cloud of ignorance and barbarism overspread the north of Europe three hundred years ago. The minds of men, addicted to superstition, contracted a narrowness that destroyed genius. Accordingly we find the compositions of those times trivial and puerile to the last degree. But let it be allowed, that, amidst all the untoward circumstances of the age, a genius might arise, it is not easy to determine what could induce him to give the honour of his compositions to an age so remote. We find no fact that he has advanced, to favour any designs which could be entertained by any man who lived in the fifteenth century. But should we suppose a poet, through humour, or for reasons which cannot be seen at this distance of time, would ascribe his own compositions to Ossian, it is next to impossible, that he could impose
b upon



upon his countrymen, when all of them were so well acquainted with the traditional poems of their ancestors.

THE strongest objection to the authenticity of the poems now given to the public under the name of Ossian, is the improbability of their being handed down by tradition through so many centuries. Ages of barbarism some will say, could not produce poems abounding with the disinterested and generous sentiments so conspicuous in the compositions of Ossian; and could these ages produce them, it is impossible but they must be lost, or altogether corrupted in a long succession of barbarous generations.

THESE objections naturally suggest themselves to men unacquainted with the ancient state of the northern parts of Britain. The bards, who were an inferior order of the Druids, did not share their bad fortune. They were spared by the victorious king, as it was through their means only he could hope for immortality to his fame. They attended him in the camp, and contributed to establish his power by their songs. His great actions were magnified, and the populace, who had no ability to examine into his character narrowly, were dazzled with his fame in the rhimes of the bards. In the mean time, men assumed sentiments that are rarely to be met with in an age of barbarism. The bards who were originally the disciples of the Druids, had their minds opened, and their ideas enlarged, by being initiated in the learning of that celebrated order. They could form a perfect hero in their own minds, and ascribe that character to their prince. The inferior chiefs made this ideal character the model of their conduct, and by degrees brought their minds to that generous spirit which breathes in all the poetry of the times. The prince, flattered by
his

his bards, and rivalled by his own heroes, who imitated his character as described in the eulogies of his poets, endeavoured to excel his people in merit, as he was above them in station. This emulation continuing, formed at last the general character of the nation, happily compounded of what is noble in barbarity, and virtuous and generous in a polished people.

WHEN virtue in peace, and bravery in war, are the characteristics of a nation, their actions become interesting, and their fame worthy of immortality. A generous spirit is warmed with noble actions, and becomes ambitious of perpetuating them. This is the true source of that divine inspiration, to which the poets of all ages pretended. When they found their themes inadequate to the warmth of their imaginations, they varnished them over with fables, supplied by their own fancy, or furnished by absurd traditions. These fables, however ridiculous, had their abettors; posterity either implicitly believed them, or through a vanity natural to mankind, pretended that they did. They loved to place the founders of their families in the days of fable, when poetry, without the fear of contradiction, could give what characters she pleased of her heroes. It is to this vanity that we owe the preservation of what remain of the works of Ossian. His poetical merit made his heroes famous in a country where heroism was much esteemed and admired. The posterity of these heroes, or those who pretended to be descended from them, heard with pleasure the eulogiums of their ancestors; bards were employed to repeat the poems, and to record the connection of their patrons with chiefs so renowned. Every chief in process of time had a bard in his family, and the office became at last hereditary. By the succession of these bards, the poems concerning the ancestors of the family were handed down from generation to generation; they were repeated to the whole clan on



solemn occasions, and always alluded to in the new compositions of the bards. This custom came down near to our own times; and after the bards were discontinued, a great number in a clan retained by memory, or committed to writing, their compositions, and founded the antiquity of their families on the authority of their poems.

THE use of letters was not known in the North of Europe till long after the institution of the bards: the records of the families of their patrons, their own, and more ancient poems were handed down by tradition. Their poetical compositions were admirably contrived for that purpose. They were adapted to music; and the most perfect harmony observed. Each verse was so connected with those which preceded or followed it, that if one line had been remembered in a stanza, it was almost impossible to forget the rest. The cadences followed in so natural a gradation, and the words were so adapted to the common turn of the voice, after it is raised to a certain key, that it was almost impossible, from a similarity of sound, to substitute one word for another. This excellence is peculiar to the Celtic tongue, and is perhaps to be met with in no other language. Nor does this choice of words clog the sense or weaken the expression. The numerous flexions of consonants, and variation in declension, make the language very copious.

THE descendants of the Celtæ, who inhabited Britain and its isles, were not singular in this method of preserving the most precious monuments of their nation. The ancient laws of the Greeks were couched in verse, and handed down by tradition. The Spartans, through a long habit, became so fond of this custom, that they would never allow their laws to be committed to writing. The actions of great men, and the elogiums of kings and heroes were preserved in the same manner. All the historical monuments of the
old.



old Germans were comprehended in their ancient songs; which were either hymns to their gods, or elegies in praise of their heroes, and were intended to perpetuate the great events in their nation which were carefully interwoven them. This species of composition was not committed to writing, but delivered by oral tradition. The care they took to have the poems taught to their children, the uninterrupted custom of repeating them upon certain occasions, and the happy measure of the verse, served to preserve them for a long time uncorrupted. This oral chronicle of the Germans was not forgot in the eighth century, and it probably would have remained to this day, had not learning, which thinks every thing, that is not committed to writing, fabulous, been introduced. It was from poetical traditions that Garcillaffo composed his account of the Yncas of Peru. The Peruvians had lost all other monuments of their history, and it was from ancient poems which his mother, a princess of the blood of the Yncas, taught him in his youth, that he collected the materials of his history. If other nations then, that had been often overrun by enemies, and had sent abroad and received colonies, could, for many ages, preserve, by oral tradition, their laws and histories uncorrupted, it is much more probable that the ancient Scots, a people so free of intermixture with foreigners, and so strongly attached to the memory of their ancestors, had the works of their bards handed down with great purity.

Tacitus de
mor. Germ.

Abbé de la
Bleterie Re-
marques sur
la Germanie.

It will seem strange to some, that poems admired for many centuries in one part of this kingdom should be hitherto unknown in the other; and that the British, who have carefully traced out the works of genius in other nations, should so long remain strangers to their own. This, in a great measure, is to be imputed to those who understood both languages and never attempted a translation. They, from being acquainted but with detached pieces, or from a



modesty, which perhaps the present translator ought, in prudence, to have followed, despaired of making the compositions of their bards agreeable to an English reader. The manner of those compositions is so different from other poems, and the ideas so confined to the most early state of society, that it was thought they had not enough of variety to please a polished age.

THIS was long the opinion of the translator of the following collection; and though he admired the poems, in the original, very early, and gathered part of them from tradition for his own amusement, yet he never had the smallest hopes of seeing them in an English dress. He was sensible that the strength and manner of both languages were very different, and that it was next to impossible to translate the Galic poetry into any thing of tolerable English verse; a prose translation he could never think of, as it must necessarily fall short of the majesty of an original. It was a gentleman, who has himself made a figure in the poetical world, that gave him the first hint concerning a literal prose translation. He tried it at his desire, and the specimen was approved. Other gentlemen were earnest in exhorting him to bring more to the light, and it is to their uncommon zeal that the world owes the Galic poems, if they have any merit.

IT was at first intended to make a general collection of all the ancient pieces of genius to be found in the Galic language; but the translator had his reasons for confining himself to the remains of the works of Ossian. The action of the poem that stands the first, was not the greatest or most celebrated of the exploits of Fingal. His wars were very numerous, and each of them afforded a theme which employed the genius of his son. But, excepting the present poem, those pieces are irrecoverably lost, and there only remain a few fragments



in the hands of the translator. Tradition has still preserved, in many places, the story of the poems, and many now living have heard them, in their youth, repeated.

THE complete work, now printed, would, in a short time, have shared the fate of the rest. The genius of the highlanders has suffered a great change within these few years. The communication with the rest of the island is open, and the introduction of trade and manufactures has destroyed that leisure which was formerly dedicated to hearing and repeating the poems of ancient times. Many have now learned to leave their mountains, and seek their fortunes in a milder climate; and though a certain *amor patriæ* may sometimes bring them back, they have, during their absence, imbibed enough of foreign manners to despise the customs of their ancestors. Bards have been long disused, and the spirit of genealogy has greatly subsided. Men begin to be less devoted to their chiefs, and consanguinity is not so much regarded. When property is established, the human mind confines its views to the pleasure it procures. It does not go back to antiquity, or look forward to succeeding ages. The cares of life increase, and the actions of other times no longer amuse. Hence it is, that the taste for their ancient poetry is at a low ebb among the highlanders. They have not, however, thrown off the good qualities of their ancestors. Hospitality still subsists, and an uncommon civility to strangers. Friendship is inviolable, and revenge less blindly followed than formerly.

To say any thing, concerning the poetical merit of the poems, would be an anticipation on the judgment of the public. The poem which stands first in the collection is truly epic. The characters are strongly marked, and the sentiments breathe heroism. The subject of it is an invasion of Ireland by Swaran king of Lochlin, which is the
name



name of Scandinavia in the Galic language. Cuchullin, general of the Irish tribes in the minority of Cormac king of Ireland, upon intelligence of the invasion, assembled his forces near Tura, a castle on the coast of Ulster. The poem opens with the landing of Swaran, councils are held, battles fought, and Cuchullin is, at last, totally defeated. In the mean time, Fingal, king of Scotland, whose aid was solicited before the enemy landed, arrived and expelled them from the country. This war, which continued but six days and as many nights, is, including the episodes, the whole story of the poem. The scene is the heath of Lena near a mountain called Cromleach in Ulster.

ALL that can be said of the translation, is that it is literal, and that simplicity is studied. The arrangement of the words in the original is imitated, and the inversions of the style observed. As the translator claims no merit from his version, he hopes for the indulgence of the public where he fails. He wishes that the imperfect semblance he draws, may not prejudice the world against an original, which contains what is beautiful in simplicity, and grand in the sublime.

ADVER -

