REVIEW


It may come us a surprise to one or two of this journal’s readership, but romance is not dead. At least, not in the academy it isn’t. But I am referring to the Romantic past, rather than the candle-lit anticipation of the future, and which is the focus of two high quality collections of essays. Each book is a reassessment of Scotland’s literary output, perception, and identity in the ‘long’ eighteenth century. An important exemplar within *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, and the focus of *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, are the Ossianic writings of James Macpherson (1736-1796). In both books Macpherson’s fabrications and discovery of the ancient poetry of Ossian are regarded as the dawn of Romanticism. Just how that movement of ideas and cultural constructions is to be understood remains of crucial importance, not just for the history of the period, but for making sense of Scotland’s evolving national identity. In their introduction, Davis, Duncan and Sorensen set out to challenge the dominant anglocentric construction of Romanticism still persuasive to many. Their case is supported by first restating that Edinburgh was no cultural backwater at this time, with its intellectual elite hovering around the university and with the publishing houses sustaining an extensive range of high quality periodicals. The city was one of the great centres of literary culture in Europe and North America. With Burns’s use of the vernacular and Scott’s creation of the historical novel, Scotland had its own literary history, one, it is argued, that ‘describes rhythms of continuity, change, and disjunction quite different from the English model to which it
has been subordinated’ (p. 3). In her own chapter, Leith Davis explains how song was used to keep a sense of Scottishness within Britain, how Burns’s use of song culture in particular maintained a challenge to the British literary tradition (pp. 199-200). An important spur to this book’s reassessment is Samuel Johnson’s denunciation of Ossian and the Highland Scots. Johnson made his judgement despite, as Ian Duncan points out in his chapter, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* (1775) being published at the zenith of the Scottish Enlightenment. It was a point the great commentator chose to ignore (pp. 38-9) and others, uncritically, have followed him.

Written by scholars from both sides of the Atlantic, there are thirteen chapters here to be read. The first, by the ever insightful Cairns Craig, carries on where the introduction left off. He reasserts Scotland’s place in the history of Romanticism, showing it was of sufficient importance to rival the nation’s place in Enlightenment history, dazzling though that was. By exploring the production of knowledge, in particular Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s reassessment of David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* through the writings of David Hume, Craig is able to interrogate the concept and the reach of Romanticism. He develops an argument that challenges inferiorist interpretations of cultural development head on. If Macpherson’s *Ossian* had an influence that went beyond its fabrication and was thus believed authentic, Craig contends, then Romanticism at that time need no longer be seen as ‘evasion’, as inferiorists would suggest. If that is the case, the argument follows, Scotland’s Romanticism can surely take its place at the centre of what was a European wide movement (which, indeed, is the premise of Gaskell’s collection). That the towering intellectuals of the Enlightenment did not dominate totally the production of knowledge in this period is a theme dealt with in Susan Manning’s exploration of the rise of antiquarianism. Dismissed for its obsession with ‘things’ and interminable detail, rather than the grand theories of the philosophical tradition, it remained a persistently popular and rival means of understanding the dialectic of nature and modernism. As Manning explains, ‘Antiquarians were the misers of historiography. As the antiquarian’s delight in the detail of his collection impeded narrative progress in history, so the miser’s accumulated hoard of coins was anathema to the circulating economic and sympathetic currencies of Civil Society’ (p. 67). The rivalry, then, was more
equal than some historians of the Enlightenment have hitherto implied. Its consequence for all of us working in higher education is, as Manning concludes, that ‘... antiquarianism, placing the marginal at the center of attention, may have functioned as a kind of joke, a historiographical mock-heroic unwriting the epic imperialism of the Science of Man into the miserly barbarisms and secret pleasures of disciplinary pursuits whose public self-justification lay in utility and specialist expertise’ (p. 73). The value of taking the antiquarian position, and an analysis of their individualistic role, is presented as a means of analysing Scotland in the post Enlightenment years (the chapter by Ferris). Similarly, the writings of that great depository of Scottish history Walter Scott are highlighted along with much emphasis on Scotland’s deep rooted, yet often illusive, ballad tradition, as part of the nation’s Romanticism. The vibrancy of these traditions is there to be read and to be heard (if only metaphorically).

Remarkably consistent in tone, this is high-class research that does much to undermine the more crass interpretations of Scotland’s identity as it developed over the nineteenth century. Nor is it pride that prompts the contributors to reject the arguments of inferiorism readily adopted by other commentators. With the evidence put in context, and not subject to uncritical analytical constructions from elsewhere, then alternative realities become apparent. Perceiving Scotland on its own terms in this way has been rehearsed before, by a number of the contributors here especially, yet this book adds depth and nuance, and is to be welcomed as an important advance of our knowledge.

If we need further confirmation of the impact of Scotland’s Romantic literary traditions in the wider world, then weighing in at more than 450 pages and $250 is Howard Gaskill’s *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*. This, it seems clear, was a real labour of love by the editor. Along with an extensive introduction by Gaskill, it contains twenty chapters by a group of international scholars who prepared their submissions by meeting for a series of colloquia and seminars to share and develop their ideas. The volume begins with a capacious timeline by Paul Barnaby charting the transitions of Macpherson’s *Ossian* around Europe, the literary criticism it underwent, and detailing the debt owed by the wider Romantic literary canon. This alone is enough to confirm so many of the arguments put forward in *Scotland and
the Borders of Romanticism, but the detail is found in the chapters that follow.

Macpherson’s reception at home dominates the first four chapters, although resonating partly in others. Not only is it important to contrast the stellar impact of Macpherson’s ‘discoveries’ in England and Scotland (chapter by Moore), the assessment of how he was read in Gaelic Scotland (Meek) offers a valuable corrective to the anglocentric literature (Samuel Johnson included). Meek places Ossian at the centre of ‘sublime existence’, offering a guide to travellers of Scotland whether they be ‘physical or metaphysical’ (p. 66). The ‘discovery’ of Ossian had a profound influence on that great Welsh literary and Bardic forger (amongst his many other careers) that was Iolo Morganwg (p. 76, Constantine) – he and Macpherson make a wonderful contrast. But the main part of the collection examines how Ossian and Fingal were read in other lands, in other constructions of Romanticism. In his own version of the Grand Tour, Macpherson’s creations permeated Ireland, Brittany, France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, the Czech lands, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Sweden and Finland – all countries analysed in this collection. Concluding with the portrayal of Ossian in music and art, and with a cover depicting Ossian Singing his Swan Song (c.1785) by Danish artist Nicolai Abildgaard, these essays are already a standard point of reference for all with an interest in this topic. The designation ‘comprehensive’ should, I think, be given freely to The Reception of Ossian in Europe.

Taken together, these books offer new and stronger foundations upon which an understanding of Scotland’s contribution to the Romantic age can be assessed. A little expensive they may be (in the Scottish style of understatement), yet invaluable for the fine scholarship to be found therein.

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