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Lindfield-Ott, Kristin

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Epic Scotland: Wilkie, Macpherson and other Homeric Efforts

Introduction — Epics in Scotland/18th C

As Casey Dué points out, ‘in recent years a number of Homerists have approached the so-called Homeric Question by investigating Homer as author and “inventor” of the poetic tradition that we know as the *Iliad*, and ‘in the eighteenth century [...] scholars and translators, most notably Alexander Pope, understood the term invention quite differently, assessing the “genius” of Homer in terms of “fire” and “invention”’.¹ This essay seeks to situate a number of eighteenth-century Scottish epics — Hamilton’s *Wallace*, Wilkie’s *Epigoniad*, and Macpherson’s *Highlander* within an epic tradition that — some argue — had been largely discontinued in Britain by the mid-eighteenth century.² This essay will begin with some general remarks on epics and the state of epic writing in eighteenth-century Scotland. Its focus, however, lies on Hamilton, Wilkie and Macpherson, who — apart from the Ossianic Collections — have not received much critical attention. This essay will discuss their works as epic continuations as well as in relation to contemporary notions of epic writing. Finally, the essay will conclude with a very brief excursion into 20th-century Scottish epic writing (MacDiarmid and Garioch) to show that the eighteenth-century examples explored here are not the end, but merely a waypoint in Scottish epic writing.

The best-known Scottish epics are, perhaps, John Barbour’s *The Brus* and Blind Harry’s *Wallace*. *The Brus*, a long narrative poem written in the 1370s, tells the story of Robert the Bruce and Sir James (Black) Douglas during the Scottish Wars of Independence in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. In almost 14,000 octosyllabic ‘Inglis’ lines the poem celebrates Robert I and Douglas as chivalric heroes, culminating in the burial of Bruce’s heart at Dunfermline Abbey. Its patriotic sentiments — most notably that ‘freedom is a noble thing!’ — are often commented on by critics and historians alike, and Barbour is heralded as the most influential

¹ Casey Dué, ‘The Invention of Ossian’, *Classics@* 3
[\[http://chs.harvard.edu/wa/pageR?tn=ArticleWrapper&bdc=12&mn=1334\]](http://chs.harvard.edu/wa/pageR?tn=ArticleWrapper&bdc=12&mn=1334), p. 1.

² Cf. Margaret Rubel, *Savage and Barbarian: Historical Attitudes in the Criticism of Homer and Ossian in Britain, 1760-1800* (Amsterdam 1978).

of the Early Scots writers. The *Wallace*, on the other hand, is a late fifteenth-century romance that commemorates William Wallace's fight for freedom. It is, as Anne McKim calls it, a 'verse biography', and while its content is not strictly historical, the poem's portrayal of Wallace has had a lasting impact.³ The poem was adapted (and modernised) by William Hamilton of Gilbertfield in 1722, and although perhaps aesthetically unremarkable the poem was credited by Robert Burns as having 'poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest'.⁴ This patriotism is something we will encounter again in our later texts (as well as Hamilton's version itself) in the main section of this essay.

As noted above, epic poetry became an increasingly unpopular mode in Scotland toward the mid-eighteenth century; by 1808 the *Annual Register* noted that 'the epic poem, languishing under the piercing rays of science, has died a natural death. The last efforts in this way, at all respectable, are, the Leonidas of Glover, the Henriade of Voltaire, and Wilkie's Epigoniad.⁵ However, in the mid-eighteenth century the literati were keen to keep promoting epic poetry as the standard of writing in their essays on aesthetics and taste. While some critics have seen this as a political (as well as aesthetic) move, arguing that 'to impose epic form on a contemporary society by imprisoning it in the safe distance of antiquity' might signal 'a lingering desire to render the Highlands safe for ever', there is a clearly defined aesthetic grounding in the resurgence of epic writing in the mid-eighteenth century.⁶ In this the literati looked to the classics (instead to their own medieval traditions), and with Thomas Blackwell's publication of *An Enquiry into the Life and Writing of Homer* in 1735 discussions of epic writing quickly became subsumed into pre-Romantic ideas of genius and originality. David Hume, for example, considers epic writing a number of his *Essays*

³ Anne McKim, 'The Wallace: Introduction', in *The Wallace: Selections* (Kalamazoo: Middle English Text Series, 2003) [<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/mckim-wallace-introduction>]. As for its impact, Mel Gibson's 1995 film *Braveheart* is based on the poem.

⁴ J. de Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy (eds.), *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), I. 136. Similarly, Gavin Douglas's middle-Scots translation of the *Aeneid* (the *Eneados*) was republished in 1710 as *Virgil's Aeneis, Translated into Scottish Verse, by the Famous Gawin Douglas Bishop of Dunkeld*.

⁵ *Annual Register* 1808 (London, 1810), p. 3.

⁶ Fiona Stafford, 'Primitivism and the 'Primitive' Poet: A Cultural Context for Macpherson's Ossian', *Celticism*, ed. Terence Brown (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 79–96, pp. 86–87.

Moral, Political, and Literary. In ‘Essay XX: Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing’ he notes that ‘excessive refinements’ — ‘too much ornament’, that is — is not ‘agreeable [...] in the epic’, and in ‘Essay XXIII: Of the Standard of Taste’ he suggests that ‘the persons introduced [...] in epic poetry, must be represented as reasoning, and thinking, and concluding, and acting, suitably to their character and circumstances’.⁷ And indeed, if we look to the continent we find Voltaire remarking in 1762 that ‘today it is from Scotland that we get rules of taste in all the arts, from epic poetry to gardening’.⁸ By the middle of the century Scotland had thus become the cradle not just of taste, but — specifically — of epic poetry. By 1762, of course, James Macpherson’s Ossianic Collections had taken Europe by storm, and while Wilkie’s *Epigoniad* was less successful outside of Britain, its largely positive reception in Britain signalled a distinctly Scottish mid-century resurgence of epic writing.⁹

Voltaire had explored epic poetry earlier, and particularly in his 1727 *Essay upon the Epick Poetry of the European Nations*. Written in English, the essay argued that ‘the best modern Writers have mix’d the Taste of their Country, with that of the Ancients’.¹⁰ Both the *Epigoniad* and Macpherson’s epics do this; the *Epigoniad* uses polished eighteenth-century heroic couplets to narrate the story of the Epigoni and their war against Thebes, while Macpherson brings the ‘ancients’ to Scotland in both the Ossianic Collections and *The Highlander*. Additionally, *The Highlander* shares similarities with both the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* (while, like the *Epigoniad*, harkening back to Pope’s and Dryden’s couplets). Voltaire went on to argue, in the section on Milton, that ‘every Language has its own particular Genius, flowing chiefly from the Genius of the Nation, and partly from its own Nature’. This anticipates Blackwell’s *Enquiry*, which, of course, argued for the

⁷ D. Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp.192 and 240.

⁸ ‘C’est un effet admirable des progrès de l’esprit humain qu’aujourd’hui il nous vient d’Écosse de règles de goût dans tous les arts, depuis le poëme épique jusqu’au jardinage. L’esprit humain s’étend tous les jours, et nous ne devons pas désespérer bientôt des poétiques et des rhétoriques des îles Orcades’. Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1879), xxv, 161–62.

⁹ It is worth pointing out that Wilkie and Ossian were seen as primitive bards by the literati. Cf. Stafford, ‘Primitivism and the ‘Primitive’ Poet’, p. 87.

¹⁰ Voltaire, *An Essay upon the Civil Wars of France, Extracted from curious Manuscripts. And also upon the Epick Poetry of the European Nations from Homer down to Milton* (London: S. Jallason, 1727), p. 41.

importance of circumstance and conditions for the production of art. And although Voltaire here focuses on language rather than content, he does admit a connection between national characteristics and linguistic, and poetic, qualities:

the Freedom of Society in France, and the Turns of the Phrases, which, as they admit of no Transposition, are the more perspicuous, qualify exceedingly the French tongue for Conversation. The former Roughness of the English Language, now improv'd into Strength and Energy, its Copiousness, its admitting of many Inversions, fit it for more sublime Performances. [...] To this happy Freedom, that the British Nation enjoys in every Thing, are owing many excellent poetical versions of the ancient Poets.¹¹

'Freedom' is the key here: freedom in society is linked to freedom in expression, and freedom in expression in turn to freedom to imitate, poeticise and produce 'sublime Performances'. One might be tempted to read Wilkie's and Macpherson's mid-century epics as British Whiggish libertarian writings, but their Scottishness, and their shared themes of war, disparate nation states united by common enemy (Wilkie) and heroic Scots triumphing over invading foes (Macpherson) might suggest otherwise.

Hamilton

In 1722 William Hamilton of Gilbertfield published *A New Edition of the Life and Heroick Actions of the Renoun'd Sir William Wallace, General and Governour of Scotland* — an adaption and translation of Blind Harry's *The Actes and Deidis of the Illustre and Vallyeant Campioun Schir William Wallace* (c. 1477, manuscript 1488 [MS Advocates 19.2.2]). Harry's *Wallace* was one of the first books printed in Scotland, and between its initial publication and the Union in 1707 it remained hugely popular.¹² In modern literary criticism Hamilton is often overlooked; indeed, the few scholars that engage with him largely discuss him as a letter writer.¹³ Sergi Mainer, one of the recent scholars of the medieval original, calls Hamilton's version

¹¹ Voltaire, *Essay upon the Civil Wars*, pp. 122, 125.

¹² Cf. Elspeth King, 'Introduction' to *Blind Harry's Wallace* (Luath, 1998), p. xi. King argues that Hamilton's edition 'became the most commonly owned book in Scotland' (p. xi).

¹³ Cf., for example, Alan Riach, 'James K. Baxter and Robert Burns: the form of address', *JNZL: Journal of New Zealand Literature* 30 (2012), 52–73; David E. Shuttleton, "'Nae Hottentots: Thomas Blacklock, Robert Burns, and the Scottish Vernacular Revival', *Eighteenth-Century Life* 37:1 (2013), 21–50.

‘adapted and translated to post-Reformation and eighteenth-century tastes’, and Jeremy Smith notes Hamilton’s translation as ‘a modernised version for a contemporary readership’.¹⁴ Felicity Riddy engages with Hamilton’s version in a national context, arguing not only that it was the one ‘read by both Burns and Wordsworth’, and therefore of keen interest to Romantic-period writers interested in vernacular poetry and regional writing, but also links Hamilton’s version to the Act of Union that formed the United Kingdom, and laments Scotland its independence: ‘the printing history suggests that the poem really took off after the union of the crowns [in 1707], when its bitter resentment at the loss of Scottish autonomy acquired a new contemporary resonance’.¹⁵ This contemporary resonance has been questioned by Graeme Morton, who argues that the ‘authenticity of [the medieval] *Wallace* came from being labelled contemporary to its hero, executed in 1305’, and that the later reworking in turn became ‘the basis of a shared memory’ for Hamilton and his readers.¹⁶ In this Morton does not allow Hamilton’s version contemporary relevance beyond ideas of shared cultural memory and the backwards-looking ethos that characterises much of eighteenth-century Scottish Culture, but Riddy’s argument is convincing: Hamilton’s version, she writes, ‘taught its readers, in a period of the anglicisation of Scottish culture, how to feel Scottish’.¹⁷

Hamilton’s *Wallace*, seen in its own right rather than as merely a translation or adaptation of the medieval original, is not just important in terms of Scottish politics or culture: reading it as a direct response to the Union of 1707 is, perhaps, a tad too simplistic, but similarly seeing it merely as an ‘update’ of a medieval source text is similarly problematic. Indeed, idea of origins, creativity and genius was one of the primary concerns of eighteenth-century aesthetics. Over the course of the century the role of the author

¹⁴ Sergi Mainer, ‘Introduction: Late Medieval Scotland and the Romance Tradition’, *Scottish Cultural Review of Language and Literature* 14 (2010), 27–39, p. 34; Jeremy Smith, ‘Textual Afterlives: Barbour’s Bruce and Hary’s Wallace’, *Scottish Cultural Review of Language and Literature* 14 (2010), 37–69, 52.

¹⁵ Felicity Riddy, ‘Unmapping the Territory: Blind Hary’s *Wallace*’, in Edward J. Cowan (ed.), *The Wallace Book* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007 [2012], Kindle edition - no page numbers).

¹⁶ Graeme Morton, ‘The Social Memory of Jane Porter and her *Scottish Chiefs*’, *The Scottish Historical Review* 91:2 (2012), 311–335, p. 315.

¹⁷ Riddy, same as above.

changed significantly and the concept of originality and genius as the driving forces behind authorship gained prominence, and while this is usually situated firmly in the middle of the century — in particular, Edward Young’s *Conjectures of Original Composition* (1759) are usually cited as the turning point from *imitatio* to *creatio* — Daniel Cook has recently shown that ideas of originality and the ‘spirit of imitation’ originated much earlier in the century, with Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* essays from 1711 and 1712.¹⁸ As such we can view Hamilton’s version as a situated between these two spheres: it is clearly derivative and more than indebted to Harry’s original, but it is also, through its updated language and use of heroic couplets, rendered not only modern but firmly original. As Hamilton notes on the title page, his edition has ‘the Old obsolete Words [...] rendered more Intelligible’, and he has ‘adapted to the understanding of such who have not leisure to study the Meaning, and Import of such Phrases without the help of the glossary’.¹⁹ He has not only modernised the work, as most critics claim, but he has *adapted* it. For example, the opening of the original reads

Our antecessowris that we auld of reide [ancestors; should; read]
 And hald in mynde that noble worth died, [hold]
 We lat ourslide through verry sleuthfulnes, [bypass through
 very sloth]
 And castis us ever till utter besynes.²⁰ [turn ourselves to]

In Hamilton’s version, this becomes

Of our ancestors, brave true ancient Scots,
 Whose glorious scutcheons knew no bars nor blots;
 But blood untainted circled every vein,
 And ev’ry thing ignoble did disdain.²¹

The ‘brave true ancient Scots’ are Hamilton’s, and all three adjectives have contemporary resonances that would be echoed by Macpherson’s Ossianic Collections in the 1760s. It is only in the second line that Hamilton follows Harry’s original — the third and fourth lines, again, resonate with ideas of purity, bravery and honour. Of course, those concepts are not new — they

¹⁸ Cf. Daniel Cook, ‘On Genius and Authorship: Addison to Hazlitt’, *The Review of English Studies* 64:266 (2013), 610–629.

¹⁹ From the title page of the edition printed in Galsgow by William Duncan, 1722.

²⁰ Blind Harry, *The Wallace*, ed. Anne McKim (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p. XXXXXXXX

²¹ Hamilton, *Blind Harry’s Wallace*, ed. Elspeth King (Luath 1998), p. 1.

are found in the medieval version in abundance — but Hamilton places them at the outset of his poem. Similarly, Hamilton speaks to the reader a few lines later, saying that

Of such, I say, I'll brag and vaunt so long
As I have pow'r to use my pen or tongue;
And sound their praises in such modern strain,
As suiteth best a Scot's poetic vein.²²

Not only is there no such section in the original, but in the lines quoted above the modern editor has changed 'Scots' to 'Scot's', which certainly changes the meaning of those lines. In King's version Hamilton (or his speaker) justifies his 'modernisation' as suiting 'a Scot's poetic vein' — that is, it suits the sensibilities of a Scottish readership and a Scottish author. In Hamilton's version, however, the missing apostrophe could also signify a comment on the language used by Hamilton: the poem is in Scots, which ties in well with the author's Preface, where Hamilton notes that his edition is in 'modern *Scots*'.²³ Both readings tie in with Riddy's interpretation, and Hamilton's *Wallace* is thus an epic that both continues an earlier tradition, but one that also revitalises that tradition.

Wilkie

Wilkie's poem, published in 1757 to a mixed reception (though popular enough to warrant a second revised edition in 1759), has only received scant critical attention.²⁴ It tells the story of the Epigoni, the sons of the Argive heroes known as the 'Seven against Thebes', who had fought and been killed in the first Theban war. This war was the subject of the *Thebaid*, grouped, along with the anonymous (and lost) *Epigoni*, in the Theban Cycle, the four lost epics of ancient Greek literature.²⁵ The Epigoni, like their fathers, fought against Thebes, but unlike the first Theban war the Argives are successful and invade Thebes. The events of the *Epigoniad* are mentioned in the fourth

²² King's edition, p. 1.

²³ Hamilton, 'Preface' (1772 ed. p. v).

²⁴ Cf. Stafford, 'Primitivism and the 'Primitive' Poet', pp. 86–88.

²⁵ Cf. West, 'Introduction', *Greek Epic Fragments*, Loeb Classical Library 497, ed. and transl. by Martin L. West (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), p. 4.

book of the *Iliad*, where Sthenelus gives Agamemnon a short account of the sacking of Thebes.²⁶ There are no extant whole works that Wilkie could have used as source materials, and there are only a handful of surviving references to ancient versions of the story. Herodotus mentions Homer's *Epigoni* (but questions the authorship), while *The Contest of Homer and Hesiod* lists the 7000-line *Epigoni* as Homer's work, beginning with the line 'But now, Muses, let us begin on the younger men'.²⁷ Wilkie himself, in the Preface that preceded the first edition of the *Epigoniad*, says that the 'story [of the poem] is taken from the accounts which we have of the heroic age', and admits to poetic licence in adding the characters Agamemnon and Menelaus and omitting Sthenelus.²⁸

Wilkie prefaced *The Epigoniad* with a lengthy tract intended to situate his poem in the wider literary and aesthetic contexts of the period. The Preface serves two purposes: it allows Wilkie to formulate a sustained theory of genre and the relationship between antiquity and present, and it contains an apology and explanation of those parts of the poem that may evoke criticism in his contemporary readership.²⁹ Epic poetry, Wilkie argues, should 'extend our ideas of human perfection, or, as the critics express it, to excite admiration'.³⁰ This is done in several ways: through its 'magnified' and heroic characters, through the universal manners it depicts, and through its subjects.³¹ The characters should be 'accommodated, rather to our

²⁶ In Pope's translation (IV. 454-465):
Not so fierce *Capaneus*' undaunted son,
Stern as his sire, the boaster thus begun.
What needs, O monarch, this invidious praise,
Our selves to lessen, while our sires you raise?
Dare to be just, *Atrides*! and confess
Our valour equal, tho' our fury less.
With fewer troops we storm'd the *Theban* wall,
And happier, saw the sev'nfold city fall.
In impious acts the guilty fathers dy'd;
The sons subdu'd, for heav'n was on their side.
Far more than heirs of all our parents fame,
Our glories darken their diminish'd name.

²⁷ *Herodotus: The Histories*, transl. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin, 2003), 4.32 (p. 250); for *Contest*, see *Greek Epic Fragments*, Loeb Classical Library 497, ed. and transl. by Martin L. West (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), p. 55.

²⁸ William Wilkie, 'Preface' to *The Epigoniad* (Edinburgh, 1757), pp. v and xl.

²⁹ Wilkie, 'Preface', p. xlii.

³⁰ Wilkie, 'Preface', p. vi.

³¹ Wilkie, 'Preface', pp. iv, vi and vii.

notions of heroic greatness, than to the real state of human nature'; this suggests a certain familiarity with epic poetry on the part of the reader, as without this they would struggle to align the characters in epic poetry with that heroic greatness.³² Universal manners 'are those which arise from the original frame and constitution of the human nature, and which consequently are the same in all nations and periods of the world — this accounts for the appeal for classical texts in modern, enlightened Scotland.³³ Finally, the subjects of epic poetry should be those 'that have never been treated of by regular historians' — those, Wilkie argues, handed down by tradition only.³⁴ In this, Wilkie inadvertently aligns himself with history writing: if the subjects of epic have not been treated by *regular* historians, then surely the epic poet who bases their poem on them is an *irregular* historian, but a historian nonetheless. Indeed, by insisting on a subjects 'taken from periods too early to fall within the reach of true history' — 'those which are most remote from our own' — Wilkie actually attempts to forestall the political criticism levelled at him by both modern and contemporary commentators: that the ancient Greek society depicted in *The Epigoniad* is some sort of code for eighteenth-century Scotland, and that Wilkie himself is a sort of primitive poet.³⁵

In terms of genre theory, Wilkie distinguishes the epic from comedy and tragedy, arguing that epic poetry must contain a set of established 'machinery', consisting of 'how heaven and hell must both of them be put in motion, and brought into the action; how events altogether out of the common road of human affairs, and no ways countenanced either by reason or experience, must be offered to men's imaginations, so as to be admitted for true'.³⁶ This means that epic poetry should include the supernatural, both in terms of its divine apparatus and characters, and in terms of its inclusion of uncommon and unrealistic events and interventions. Unlike tragedy and comedy, which take their subjects from 'true history' and 'recent instances', epic poetry 'should be taken from tradition only'; that is, the subjects of epic poetry should be fictional but believable.³⁷ Furthermore, epic poetry is

³² Wilkie, 'Preface', p. vi.

³³ Wilkie, 'Preface', pp. iv–v.

³⁴ Wilkie, 'Preface', pp. vii and xxxv.

³⁵ Wilkie, 'Preface', pp. vi and viii.

³⁶ Wilkie, 'Preface', p. viii.

³⁷ Wilkie, 'Preface', p. xiii.

distinguished by its recognisable 'epic machinery': 'how heaven and hell must both of them be put in motion, and brought into the action; how events altogether out of the common road of human affairs, and no ways countenanced either by reason or experience, must be offered to men's imaginations, so as to be admitted for true'.³⁸ Fiona Stafford has argued that the opening lines of the poem continue Wilkie's remarks from the Preface on the 'inferiority of the modern poet to Homer', but this undervalues Wilkie's intentions: 'I now resume the strain', he argues, 'Not from proud hope and emulation vain,/By this attempt to merit equal praise/With worth heroic, born in happier days'.³⁹ Wilkie's qualifies this intention a few lines later, noting that 'love excites me, and desire to trace/his glorious steps, tho' with unequal pace'.⁴⁰ The emphasis on inequality, however, is not as much about his disbelief in his own poetic abilities, but instead, perhaps, a reference to how long it had taken him to compose the poem, and to how little plot (in comparison to Homer) he covers in the poem.⁴¹

Wilkie's contemporary critics were quick to criticise the work. Although the poem 'dazzled the Scottish reading public', as Fiona Stafford puts it, others were quick to condemn the poem and its author.⁴² In July 1757, two months after the publication of the poem, the *Critical Review* published a damning critique of Wilkie's poem. It argued that the *Epigoniad* 'resembles and epic poem in very little else but the outward form, and extent of it', and criticises Wilkie for omitting both a general plan and an argument for each chapter, something with evidently the contemporary reading public had come to expect of such productions.⁴³ Furthermore, the review is upset at Wilkie's 'anachronistic' characters (particularly Agamemnon and Menelaus), and his portrayal of Diomedes as 'weak and effeminate'.⁴⁴ The review also attacks Wilkie for straying from the model of the *Iliad* and including, for example, episodes reminiscent of 'that kind of fiction which distinguishes

³⁸ Wilkie, 'Preface', p. viii.

³⁹ Wilkie, 'Epigoniad', I, ll. 21–24; Stafford, 'Primitivism and the 'Primitive' Poet', p. 86.

⁴⁰ Wilkie, 'Epigoniad', I, ll. 31–32

⁴¹ Cf HUME OR WHOEVER WHO TALKS ABOUT HOW LONG IT TOOK HIM TO COMPOSE IT

⁴² Fiona Stafford, 'Primitivism and the 'Primitive' Poet: A Cultural Context for Macpherson's Ossian', in *Celticism*, ed. Terence Brown (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 79–97, p. 86.

⁴³ Anon., 'Art .VII', *Critical Review* 4 (July 1757), 27–35, p. 28.

⁴⁴ 'Art. VII', p. 28.

the *Odyssey*'.⁴⁵ Of course, before the publication of Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* in 1759 skilful imitation was ranked far higher than creative invention, though the older concept of *inventio* (as opposed to the Romantic model of *creatio*) involved the re-arranged creation of previously created material.⁴⁶ But the poem's style is also a source for contempt: it is, the review argues, 'written in rhyme (if rhyme it may be called) and is in every part of it a poor and servile imitation of the great Homer, whose defects that author has faithfully copied, whilst the beauties of that divine writer have unluckily escaped him'.⁴⁷

Two months later Oliver Goldsmith wrote a damning review in the *Monthly Review* in September 1757, arguing that 'The Epigoniad seems to be one of these *new old* performances; a work that would no more have pleased a peripatetic of the academic grove, than it will captivate the unlettered subscriber of one of our circulating libraries'.⁴⁸ He also criticises Wilkie's handling of his materials, examining his historical inaccuracies in details and concluding that Wilkie 'has not only forsook, but contradicted [tradition], on almost every occasion; and given up the conduct of his poem to an invention barren of incidents, or at best productive of trifling ones'.⁴⁹ Goldsmith was also keen to criticise Wilkie for his use of language: 'our northern bard frequently seems, indeed, at some loss for a variety of language, which has led him into many disgusting repetitions'.⁵⁰ Despite having only moved to London from Ireland the year before, Goldsmith's snide emphasis on 'northern bard' displays a degree of anti-Scottish sentiment that sought to portray literary imperfections as a national affliction; not an uncommon display of the Scotophobia that characterised English attitudes to successful Scots after the Union of 1707 and the failed Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745–6, and particularly during the period of John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute's

⁴⁵ 'Art. VII', p. 30.

⁴⁶ Cf. Robert Macfarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (OUP, 2007), p. 1.

⁴⁷ 'Art. VII', pp. 28-29.

⁴⁸ Goldsmith, 'The Epigoniad', *Critical Review* 17, 228-238, p. 228.

⁴⁹ Goldsmith, p. 228.

⁵⁰ Goldsmith, p. 233.

influence at court and as short-lived Prime Minister in the 1750s and '60s.⁵¹ Overzealous, Goldsmith not only criticises the poem as a 'Scotch production', but also for its apparent disregard for Augustan diction, spotting a 'notorious Londonism' that, he quibbles, mysteriously 'found [its] way down to Scotland'.⁵² He also condemns him for being 'strongly attracted to Hibernian shores', that is, using Irish expressions.⁵³ Goldsmith here not only mocks Wilkie's Scottishness, but at the same time attacks him for using *unScottish* (and unrefined) language.

David Hume responded to the *Critical Review* piece (though not to Goldsmith's review) in September 1759. In a 'Letter from Mr. Hume to the Author of the Critical Review, respecting Mr. Wilkie's Epigoniad', Hume displays both 'surprise, and not a little uneasiness' at the hostile piece.⁵⁴ He points out the poem's success in Scotland, and emphasises that while there are 'a few mistakes in expression and prosody', Wilkie had never left Scotland; a response that answers Goldsmith's criticism more than that of the anonymous *Critical Review* writer.⁵⁵ Instead of criticising Wilkie's mix of styles and sources, Hume praises him for his innovation: 'The whole turn of this new poem would almost lead us to imagine, that the Scottish bard had found the lost manuscript of that father of poetry [Homer], and had made a faithful translation of it into English'.⁵⁶ 'Scottish bard' has, of course, different connotations from Goldsmith's 'northern bard': it is less disparaging, and less oriented towards England and Englishness.⁵⁷ Hume's notion that innovation is something worth praising is echoed by the *Annual Register* in its 1808 article on Wilkie: 'there is no one who does not admire the variegated harmony of Wilkie's versification, formed, it would appear, on

⁵¹ Cf., for example, Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography* (CUP 2008), p. 16; or Eric Rothstein, 'Scotophilia and "Humphry Clinker": The Politics of Beggary, Bugs, and Buttocks', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 52:1 (1982), 63-78.

⁵² Goldsmith, p. 233.

⁵³ Goldsmith, p. 233.

⁵⁴ in Thomas Edward Ritchie, *An Account of the Life and Writing of David Hume, Esq.* (London, 1807), 419-438, pp. 420.

⁵⁵ Ritchie, pp. 420 and 421.

⁵⁶ Ritchie, pp. 422-423.

⁵⁷ For discussions of North Britishness cf. Colin Kidd, 'North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth-Century British Patriotisms', *The Historical Journal* 39 (1996), 361-382; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London and New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), pp. 105-32; Adam Rounce, 'Stuarts Without End: Wilkes, Churchill, and Anti-Scottishness', *Eighteenth-Century Life* 29 (2005), 20-43.

the model of Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Thomson's *Seasons*; the splendour of the descriptions, and the wonderful powers and apparent facility with which he enters into the genius of the times of which he writes, and the very soul of Homer'.⁵⁸ It is this sense of bringing to life the past that Hume also notes when he argues that Wilkie 'has drawn a more exact and faithful copy of antiquity, and has made fewer sacrifices of truth to ornament' than writers that have glossed ancient models with sentimental finishes.⁵⁹

Macpherson

James Macpherson, the editor, translator and embellisher of the group of poems known as the 'Ossianic Collections' is not generally thought of as an epic poet. While 'Fingal' and 'Temora', the titular poems of Macpherson's second and third collections of Ossianic works, are both self-proclaimed 'ancient epic poems', supposedly written in the third century by Ossian the bard, they are very much presented as *Ossian's* epics, and not Macpherson's. The first Ossianic collection, the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* are of a different genre altogether: they are *fragments*. In the 'Preface' to the *Fragments*, written by Hugh Blair (though published anonymously), the fragments are presented as having been 'originally episodes of a greater work which related to the wars of Fingal', 'ascribed to the bards'.⁶⁰ Even though the fragments are not explicitly advertised as *epic* fragments, the language here — 'wars' and 'bards' — belongs in the realm of epic, as does the mention of this 'greater work' as a 'heroic poem'.⁶¹ Indeed, the final three fragments are advertised as 'obtained of this Epic poem'.⁶² But not only were the Ossianic Collections sold as epics, they were also clearly perceived as epics by their audience. The *Critical Review's* article on *Fingal* notes that the poem will 'be found a truly epic poem, and (under correction be it spoken) in many places superior

⁵⁸ *Annual Register*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Hume, p. 433.

⁶⁰ 'Preface', p. XXXXXX; Blair admits to writing the Preface in a letter to Henry Mackenzie dated 1797, and reprinted in the *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland*, ed. H. Mackenzie, on the authenticity of the Ossianic Collections (1805).

⁶¹ 'Preface', p. xxxxxx.

⁶² 'Preface', p. xxxxx.

even to Homer and Virgil'. While subsequent readers have disagreed with this judgment, it is worth noting that Macpherson's epics are here compared to Homer *and* Virgil, when Homer alone was usually drawn up as the model for the Ossianic Collections.⁶³ For the writer of the *CR* article, *Fingal* is an epic poem primarily because 'it celebrates and records the actions of heroes; as the subject is great, single and entire'.⁶⁴ Similarly, the *Monthly Review's* article on *Temora* (vol. 28, 1763) Ossian is called 'the Homer of the North', while the *London Chronicle* (vol. 13, 1763) points out that the poem 'has all the grand essentials of the *epopæa*'.⁶⁵

The Ossianic Collections, however, were not Macpherson's first foray into epic writing. In the 1750s, after returning to his native Ruthven after leaving Marischal College in Aberdeen, Macpherson wrote two epics: 'The Hunter' (1756) and *The Highlander* (1758).⁶⁶ 'The Hunter' was never published, and shares similarities with *The Highlander*, and has thus been seen as a draft version of the later poem.⁶⁷ The plot of 'The Hunter' tells the story of Donald, a young orphaned highlander, who leaves the Highlands for Edinburgh, where an invading army is waiting to attack. He fights them off almost single-handedly, earning praise from the king and nobles. Eventually his true parentage is discovered: he is the son of a noble and thus able to marry Egidia, the king's daughter. The poem ends with their union. While the poem thus undoubtedly shows epic overtones, its premise is one of romance: Donald does not leave his home because he wants to fight for his country, like, for example, Duffus in *The Highlander* — he only hears about the invasion after he has left — but because a fairy, whose faun he accidentally kills, instills ambition in him as revenge. This presentation of the poem as a literal fairy tale immediately establishes it as a romance epic,

⁶³ This is usually followed by remarks about Macpherson's education at Aberdeen, where the curriculum was still much influenced by Thomas Blackwell's *An Enquiry into the Life and Writing of Homer* (1735).

⁶⁴ Critical Review article (644 in Scot Mag 1761)

⁶⁵ Monthly Review p. 274, London Chronicle p. 196.

⁶⁶ 'The Hunter' was written in 1756–57, and it only survives in Laing's edition of *The Poems of Ossian*. A couple of passages are dated November 1756. Laing prints the poem from a manuscript found by the Rev. John Anderson, the minister of Kingussie, after Macpherson's death. Sadly, this manuscript is now lost.

⁶⁷ Cf. Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1989), p. 61.

or an epic romance, like Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.⁶⁸ Donald's search for honour and glory, initially driven by the ambition that the fairy generated in him, is, in fact, a quest: as Barbara Fuchs points out, quests were traditionally made for love or adventure, and Donald's combines both.⁶⁹ His quest begins as an adventure, but quickly, after he has proven his worth, turns to love and the pursuit of Egidia. Similarly, Donald's (albeit unwitting) search for his origins can be seen as a quest.⁷⁰ Another romance element occurs in Canto VI, during the feast after the successful battle: the minstrel. More medieval than the Ossianic bard (and more English than Celtic), the unnamed minstrel in 'The Hunter' sings not only of the exploits of heroes, but also tells stories of love and courtship. This is reflected by the poem as a whole: both war and love are present in 'The Hunter', but love plays a far greater role than it does in *The Highlander*, which is almost exclusively focused on war; there, love is almost just a side-line to the wider concerns of war and nationalism. In 'The Hunter', love is revealed as a force stronger than patriotism: 'Love', it is said, 'only pleases; love alone shall pain:/Disturbed the mien of unaffected ease,/And all that native sweetness formed to please' (VI. 74–76). Unlike *The Highlander*, which closes with the hero as king, and his responsibilities divided between 'a husband's care' and 'Albion's rocks' (*Highlander* VI. 269, 271), the ending of 'The Hunter' is only concerned with the love interest in the poem: the the union of Donald and Egidia. This blend of epic and romance — if not its style or form — anticipates the Ossianic Collections.⁷¹

The Highlander is an epic poem in heroic couplets in the vein of Pope and Dryden. It is set in the tenth century and tells the story of the Viking

⁶⁸ David Fairer points out that 'the scholarship of John Upton (1707–60) and Thomas Warton (1728–90) in the 1750s effected a breakthrough in critical understanding of *The Faerie Queene*. Upton's *Spenser's Faerie Queene. A New Edition with a Glossary, And Notes explanatory and critical*, 2 vols (London: J. & R. Tonson, 1758 [actually 1759]) marked a great advance in establishing an authentic text and offered the earliest analysis of the historical allegory; and Warton's *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1754), expanded to two volumes in 1762, revealed for the first time the full scope of Spenser's sources, especially the poem's kinship with medieval romance' ('Historical Criticism and the English Canon: A Spenserian Dispute in the 1750s', in *Eighteenth-Century Life* 24 (2000), 43–64 (p. 45)).

⁶⁹ Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

⁷⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷¹ Cf. Dafydd Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian* (Ashgate, 2003).

invasion of Scotland. Its main character Alpin, a simple Highlander, single-handedly defeats the Vikings. He falls in love with Culena, the daughter of the Scottish king, Indulph. Eventually Alpin is discovered to be the rightful heir to the throne, Duffus — Indulph's nephew. He marries Culena, Indulph dies, and Duffus is crowned king of Scotland. Despite the lack of critical attention, or indeed popular success, the poem is an important example of Macpherson's lifelong interest in history. In the poem Macpherson translates Scotland's factual past into neo-classic verse, and its originality lies in this. *The Highlander* is original because it is the earliest historical epic set in Scotland after the battle of Culloden in 1746 and as thus is a founding text for the assertion of Scottish identity in a pro-Union British context. It is also original because of the way Macpherson refashioned history: the poem is simultaneously imitative and inventive. It imitates neo-classic epics, such as Pope's *Iliad* and Dryden's *Aeneid*, but its subject matter is inventive: history, not fiction. Its added layer of romance and pan-British nationalism sets it apart from the earlier epics. And it is original because it has traceable sources, a recognisable form, and a positive outlook. The prophecy in Canto V particularly emphasises this: it heralds British glory for Scotland.

Hall has observed that 'if his poems lack the consistency expected from historical documents [...] Macpherson achieves the coherent design expected from probable romantic fiction'.⁷² Unlike the Ossianic Collections, *The Highlander* is foremost a history in verse, with only a few sentimental elements. Its very genre — epic — is symptomatic of this: while both the Ossianic Collections and *The Highlander* have been interpreted as an attempt to formulate, or recover, the Scottish epic, the Ossianic Collections have been successfully reinterpreted as romance. *The Highlander*, though, is a valid attempt to formulate an epic that was more historical than antiquarian: its sentimental concessions, as Gerard Carruthers observes about the Ossianic Collections, are due to the period's need for 'antique subject-matter collided with the predilections of the age of sensibility'.⁷³ Dafydd Moore has pointed out the treatment of vanquished foes in the Ossianic Collections as a symptom of this sensibility — something which

⁷² Radcliffe, 'Ancient Poetry and British Pastoral', p. 35.

⁷³ Gerard C. Carruthers, 'The Invention of Scottish Literature During the Long Eighteenth Century' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2001), p. 187.

can easily be extended to the earlier *Highlander*, as Duffus also refuses to take advantage of his enemy, Haco, throughout the poem. Of course, *The Highlander*, with its neo-classic form and emotional hero, is far removed from the grandeur and sublimity of the Ossianic Collections. Yet, like the Ossianic Collections (and, Carruthers would argue, like most Scottish literature of the age), *The Highlander* adapts older material and presents an idea of Scotland both ancient and contemporary.

The poem thus anticipates the Ossianic Collections as an attempt to (re-)write Scottish history, and to give Scotland an epic. Both in itself and seen together with the Ossianic Collections it is the earliest post-Culloden attempt to forge a Scottish epic from actual historic sources; an adaptation of history that is authenticated by the past. Indeed, as Alexander Macbain observed, *The Highlander* is 'vigorously original in thought and expression'.⁷⁴ In form *The Highlander* is a straightforward neo-classical epic poem, modelled on eighteenth-century translations of the classics. Pope's *Iliad* and Dryden's *Aeneid* are particularly relevant: Macpherson's poem derives parts of its plot and expressions from these epics. On closer inspection, however, this becomes no more than a mere shared framework of poetic conventions; its originality lies in its added layer of romance and British nationalism. *The Highlander* explores at least two of the themes of romance that Dafydd Moore sets out when he discusses the genre of the Ossianic Collections: the meaning of heroism, and the nature of sentiment.⁷⁵ While Macpherson's heroes — both Scottish and Danish — display many of the character traits and values that the classical heroes adhere to, he constructs them with a sentimental finish that anticipates both the Ossianic Collections and (Romantic) Men of Feeling. Duffus in particular is singled out as compassionate: throughout the poem he displays unexpected sympathy towards Haco, his Danish opponent. Twice he has the opportunity to kill him in nocturnal duels, and both times he is overcome by sentiments. The first time he 'scorn'd to take advantage of the foe' (l. 238), he is rewarded by Haco's respect and, more materially, Haco's shield so that they can evade one another in the coming battle. The second time, Duffus is moved by

⁷⁴ Alexander Macbain, 'Macpherson's Ossian', in *The Celtic Magazine* 137:12 (1887), 145–54, 193–201, 240–54 (p. 193).

⁷⁵ Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance*, p. 84.

Haco's feelings for his bride, Aurelia, who followed Haco to the battle. Duffus's 'feeling breast' is 'touched' (III. 295) by a scene between the lovers he inadvertently witnesses, and he refrains from contending with Haco alone. While Duffus is not, of course, a knight in shining armour, on a quest to defeat a supernatural creature and to win the love of his lady, there are nonetheless elements of this in the poem. Canto IV is particularly relevant here: in it Duffus rescues Agnes, one of Culena's maids, from the unwanted advances of Corbred, which secures him not only the admiration of the Court and King Indulph, but also the love of Culena: 'fair Culena feels a keener dart,/It pierc'd her breast and sunk into her heart' (IV. 87–88). The use of 'fair' here and later in the canto is indicative of romance rather than epic, as is Duffus's description as 'gallant youth' (IV. 81). In Canto IV we also find a staple of epic poetry: games.

Conclusion

In *The Mid-Eighteenth Century*, John Butt and Geoffrey Carnall claimed that 'as for the 'classical' epic, the stubbornness of a Scot seemed now required to bring one to fruition'.⁷⁶ As this essay has shown, the Scots indeed invigorated epic writing in the period. Hamilton, Wilkie and Macpherson all produced epics that were Scottish in language and content or, in the case of Wilkie and Macpherson, where the nationality of their author mattered a great deal to their reading public. Epics are ingrained in Scottish literature, from the earliest surviving Scots text Barbour's *Brus* and Gavin Douglas's *Eneados*, a translation of the *Aeneid* into Middle Scots (1513), to Robert Burns's 'Tam O'Shanter' (1791) and twentieth-century efforts by Hugh MacDiarmid and Robert Garioch. Both MacDiarmid's 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle' (1926), and Garioch's 'Sisyphus' (1960s), both written in synthetic Scots, have been seen as epics, as has Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981).⁷⁷ As such the three epics discussed in the body of this essay are not the end-point of Scottish epic writing, but, perhaps, mark *one* revival of epic writing in Scotland.

⁷⁶ John Butt and Geoffrey Carnall, *The Mid-Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 93.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the idea of epic in the Scottish Renaissance movement, see Alan Riach, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Epic Poetry* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1991).