

Scotland's Homer comes back into literary fold

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IT WAS one of the world's greatest literary forgeries. The creation of "Scotland's Homer" by schoolmaster James Macpherson helped inspire a new romantic movement throughout the western world.

And so when the epic Gaelic poetry of the "blind bard" Ossian - which won dedicated fans including Napoleon and Thomas Jefferson - was exposed as a fake, there was a backlash led by the English intellectual giant Samuel Johnson.

But a new work cataloguing Scottish writing is to restore Macpherson's reputation, saying while he did invent a single voice for the tales of heroism and doomed love, they were largely based on stories handed down through the generations.

The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature - which will have taken five years to complete when it is published next year - will include discussions of almost every kind of Scottish writing of any significance.

The rehabilitation of Macpherson is part of a deliberate effort to give Gaelic its deserved place alongside writing in English and Scots in the pantheon of Scottish literature.

Susan Manning, professor of English literature at Edinburgh University, the editor of the 1700 to 1918 section of the multi-volume book, said the ferocious debate that ensued over the authenticity of the poems - Macpherson even challenged his arch-critic Johnson to a duel which never took place - was born largely out of cultural misunderstanding.

"In a sense what he did was somewhere between an act of recreation and creation," she said.

"The original Gaelic epics were not written down, so he was remembering things [from his childhood in Aberdeenshire], writing down things he heard on his travels and combining them with scraps of previously written-down Gaelic."

Amid massive interest, establishment literary figures began to ask Macpherson for copies of the original Gaelic manuscripts. When he was unable to produce them, some began to view him as a fraud.

"They said, 'If these are genuine, show us the originals'. He couldn't really show the originals because they belonged to an oral tradition," Prof Manning said.

"That's why it's not as simple as a fraud versus a genuine translation. A lot of Highland readers said, 'Yes, this is a translation, we remember these stories'. They would attest to its authenticity whereas the sceptics - often English or Anglo-Scots - would say translations require original manuscripts.

"It was a clash of culture between an oral and a written tradition."

The first translations by Macpherson were not presented as opening parts of a great epic by Ossian.

However Prof Manning said: "This notion gradually grew. If there was a great epic, there had to be a great epic poet and that would be Scotland's Homer.

"As Macpherson got backed into a corner, he started to produce more and more elaborate defences of it."

Ironically, Prof Manning said modern scholars view Homer, once thought to be a single genius, in a similar light to Macpherson's creation.

"Now we know not to think of Homer as the inspired bard. Homer was a committee just as much as Ossian was a committee," she said.

"The idea of Homer as a single 'blind poet' is, I think, now fairly widely discredited - in the same way we shouldn't see Ossian as a single 'blind bard'."

Artist Calum Colvin, who is professor of art photography at Dundee University, is among those to have renewed interest in Ossian.

He will take an exhibition of his work called "Ossian - Fragments Of Ancient Poetry" to Paris in November this year, partly because Napoleon was such an admirer of the work.

"I think Macpherson probably was quite a difficult person. He was a proud Highlander and he didn't take the jibes of Johnson very well," he said.

"But he was also the classic Scotsman on the make and he ended up a very wealthy man."

Belated recognition

THE forthcoming Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature will include a major section on Gaelic poets and writers who have long been ignored or downplayed by the literary establishment.

- Muireadhach Albannach O Dálaigh (fl. 1200-1224): One of the greatest poets of the medieval classical poetic tradition and progenitor of the MacMhuirichs, the most important Scottish Gaelic learned family of the middle ages.
- Donnchadh Caimbeul (Sir Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy) (c. 1443-1513): The Lord of Glenorchy, who died at Flodden, covered a wide range, from love poetry to the bawdy and scatological.
- Sileas na Ceapaich (c. 1660-1729): Born a MacDonald, she married into an eastern Highland family and wrote one of the most famous laments in Gaelic tradition, for Alasdair Dubh of Glengarry. Her range included vicious political verse connected with the 1715 rising.
- Alexander MacDonald (Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair) (c. 1695-1770): The Gaelic genius of the 18th century, he was closely involved in all the major changes of the period (his 1751 poetry collection was the first non-religious book published in Scottish Gaelic).

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