Études écossaises

17 | 2015
La poésie écossaise

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*« Splendeurs des siècles passés » : les Bretons dans les* Poèmes d’Ossian

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**Electronic version**
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises/935
DOI: 10.4000/etudesecossaises.935
ISSN: 1969-6337

**Publisher**
UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

**Printed version**
Date of publication: 25 April 2015
Number of pages: 31-46
ISBN: 978-2-84310-296-7
ISSN: 1240-1439

**Electronic reference**
Anna Bugajska, ““Tales of the Times of Old”: Britons in the *Poems of Ossian*”, *Études écossaises* [Online], 17 | 2015, Online since 25 April 2016, connection on 16 March 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises/935 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesecossaises.935

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# "Tales of the Times of Old": Britons in the *Poems of Ossian*

In the eighteenth century the strained relations that had been connecting England with Scotland were put to yet another test, with the rise of a new political organism: Great Britain. Since the Act of Union between the two countries (1707), the enmities were supposed to be forgotten and the joint "Briton" forged. The search for "Britishness", however, seemed to be undertaken with no regard for the strength of the national identities on both sides, or for the ongoing political disagreements. Given the brutality with which the Jacobite Risings (1715, 1745) were quelled, and the ensuing annihilation of the Highland culture (the Disarming Act, 1746), it is clear that the English and the Scottish still remained very much separate.

It is against the background of the reluctant union and the carnage of Culloden that the Scottish Renaissance blossomed. The Edinburgh "cabal" (in the words of Richard Sher), represented by such major names as David Hume, Hugh Blair, Adam Smith, Lord Kames, Robert Fergusson, and Allan Ramsay, was a considerable counterbalance to the lively intellectual life of London. Edinburgh of the times was compared to the London of Shakespeare and Ben Johnson (Craig, 1961, p. 31). And yet, another Johnson held supreme rule in the eighteenth-century coffee and publishing houses: Dr Samuel Johnson, the author of the first English dictionary (1755) and numerous critical and literary works, was a known Scotophobe (see, e.g., Temple's *Johnson and Macpherson: Cultural Authority and the Construction of Literary Property*, 2013), oftentimes expressing the prejudice of the majority of his countrymen. His incisive remarks in the Dictionary, famously depreciating Scots, are confirmed by the anecdotes recorded by James Boswell.

Examples of the widespread prejudice abound. John Home (1722–1808), a well-known dramatist, could not appear at the performances of his own play in England, because of the prevailing anti-Scottish sentiment (Craig, 1961, p. 161; Sher, 1982, p. 57). Abusive cartoons and political opposition (Wilkites) were abundant. Despite the achievements of the

Scottish Renaissance, in Scotland there was an overwhelming presentiment of the impending acculturation, uprooting and being culturally colonized by the southern neighbour (Gibbs, *The New Britons*; Marshall, 2008, p. 37; Temple, 1993, p. 34).

Indeed, the metaphor of rape had been employed by anti-Unionists from the very beginning. Whereas the supporters were likely to speak of the union as of a marriage, pamphlets and plays such as *The Comical History of the Marriage between Fergusia and Heptarchus* (1706), repeatedly employ the trope of violation. In both cases, Scotland is presented as a woman, and England as a dominant man (Bowers, 2005, pp. 143–4). It does not only express the difference in political power, but also relates to the model of values that came to be seen as Celtic and Anglo-Saxon. The first would be connected with sensitivity and nobility, whereas the latter with brute strength (Weinbrot, 1994, p. 478). "Scotland and its capital embody physical, moral, environmental, intellectual, and female virtue and beauty." (Weinbrot, 1994, p. 513)

The never-extinguished animosities were the reason for the rather painful birth of the "new Briton". Although antiquarians of the ilk of Macpherson and Percy realized that original Britons had more in common with the Scottish than with the English, the name has been appropriated by the latter to signify their cultural model. Louise Marshall discusses this problem in her book *National Myth and Imperial Fantasy* (2008). On the example of Ambrose Phillips' play *The Briton* she makes clear that in eighteenth-century art "British" meant "English" or "Anglo-Saxon", to the exclusion of Scots (Marshall, 2008, pp. 36–7)

Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*, appearing since 1760 and published in full edition in 1773, were to some degree the answer to the impending need for a national hero (Temple, 1993, p. 365). The famous literary "forgery" struck a chord with the sentiments of the times throughout Europe and in America. It exerted considerable influence on literature, music and painting, but for its difficulty is still not appreciated enough. The twenty-two tales comprising the collection are grouped achronologically, the characters are numerous and the language repetitive. The literary devices employed by Macpherson often veer from the commonly accepted metaphors of his age, or even subvert them. His commentary on the chief issues discussed in his times is subtle and demands careful and numerous readings.

The question of the presentation of the Anglo-Scottish feud is no exception. Macpherson does include Britons in four of Ossian's tales, but the presentation is not uniform. What is more, the author signals in his dissertation preceding the poems the close links between ancient Britons and ancient Caledonians, further complicating the picture. He refuses

to make a clear stand and hovers between the eighteenth-century vision of an Anglo-Saxon Briton and the ancient Briton of Celtic heritage. He often speaks about strangers and the "feeble race", soon to take over the realm of Fingal, but—as Robert M. Gunn notices in his essay *The Highland Clearances, and their Causes, Effects, and Results*—"the Highlander saw the Lowland Scot as a 'foreigner' and more (in their early view) like the English than any Scot" (Chapter 1). All the remarks on the strangers, ignorant of the ancient Highland culture, can be consequently read as the bitterness of the Highlander towards the Lowlander, especially pro-Unionists.

Macpherson himself is said to have harboured Jacobite sympathies throughout his lifetime, and by birth he was a Highlander (Gibbs, *The New Briton*). At the same time, however, he was an MP and he modeled his art on the popular English patterns (among others, he drew heavily from Milton). It can be seen, then, that the discussion of the portrayal of Britons in *The Poems of Ossian* is a problematic case.

For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to concentrate on the four tales which feature British characters and/or take place in the country of Britons. The poems analysed are "Carthon", "Lathmon", "Oithona", and "Calthon and Colmal", each discussion preceded by a short summary of the plot of the poem to review the minor characters and make clearer the links between the four. I hope to present the originality of Macpherson's work in relation to the common metaphors, as well as the relevance of the *Poems of Ossian* to the topics discussed in the eighteenth century Britain.

## Carthon: "the murmur of (both) waves"

The first of the Ossian's tales which mentions Britons is "Carthon". It appears early in the collection (1773 edition), being the fourth after "Cath-loda", "Comala", and "Carric-Thura". It is preceded by an ample introduction on the part of Macpherson, who provides the necessary information for the reader not to get lost *in medias res*. Although the poem itself begins at the times of Fingal, and Ossian, as the narrator, speaks of the things he himself witnessed, the tragedy has its roots in the events that had taken place during the reign of Fingal's father, Comhal, in the country of Britons (in Balclutha, by the river Clyde).

The main actor in the introduction is Clessàmor – Fingal's uncle, who in his youth was driven by the winds to the British halls, where he was favourably received by the local chief, Reuthámir. He fell in love with Moina, the chief's daughter, and received her hand in marriage.

However, this caused violent opposition among the British warriors, who provoked a fight and forced Clessàmor to retreat. Moina was left behind, despairing and pregnant. After giving birth to a boy, Carthon, she died.

When the boy was three years old, Balclutha was raided and destroyed by the Gaelic warriors, led by Comhal, and Carthon was carried away by his nurse further into the British territory. When he came of age, he was determined to avenge himself on Comhal's son, Fingal, so he set sail to Morven.

Ossian's voice takes over from Macpherson's at this point. The "murmur of the streams of Lora" (Macpherson, 1851, p. 222) brings to his mind the murmur of other waves: those carrying away Cléssamor from his pregnant wife and those bringing Carthon with his warriors to the shores of Morven. Macpherson underlines in the introduction that "carthon" means "the murmur of waves", so the association in the bard's mind is immediate. He bids Malvina to look at the lonely tomb on the plain, haunted by a ghost, and spins his tale.

On returning from one of his overseas expeditions, Fingal gives a feast, finding Clessàmor conspicuously absent. Even after so many years the old warrior is brooding over the loss of his wife, haunted by her ghost. Little does he know that in the morning Fingal will lead his army to battle with the arriving Carthon. The chief of Morven, forewarned by a ghost, comes to the shore with his warriors to await the arriving Britons. Ossian thus relates the landing:

> The sun rose on the sea, and we beheld a distant fleet. Like the mist of ocean they came and poured their youth upon the coast. The chief was among them, like the stag in the midst of the herd. His shield is studded with gold; stately strode the king of spears. (Macpherson, 1851, p. 277)

Fingal sends to Carthon his chief bard, Ullin, to negotiate surrender, but the young chief rejects the suggested terms and the battle ensues. However, the king of Morven does not face the avenger himself: he sends to battle two of his lesser chiefs, who are slain. Finally, he asks Clessàmor to face the sturdy warrior. The British chief is visibly impressed by the strength of the old man and intends to spare his life. He suspects that he might be his father:

> Carthon stood on a rock: he saw the hero rushing on. He loved the dreadful joy of his face: his strength in the locks of age! "Shall I lift that spear," he said, "that never strikes but once a foe? Or shall I, with the words of peace, preserve the warrior's life? Stately are his steps of age! lovely the remnant of his years! Perhaps it is the husband of Moina, the father of car-borne Carthon. Often have I heard that he dwelt at the echoing stream of Lora." (Macpherson, 1851, p. 230)

He tries to discourage Clessàmor from fighting, but they are both too proud to surrender. Carthon intentionally misses the Celt[1], and skillfully disarms him, but his enemy manages to wound him mortally with a dagger. Carthon, seeing Fingal coming to Clessàmor's aid, wants to engage in battle with him, but the king of Morven chooses not to deliver the deadly blow. Instead, as Carthon bleeds to death, Fingal has Ossian sing a song, commemorating the youth's valour in battle. With the remnants of his strength, Carthon passes his sword to Fingal and confesses that his father came from Morven and was the husband of Moina.

After Carthon's death, Clessàmor dies of grief. The tomb of the father and son is guarded from then on by the ghost of Moina. Ossian is sad for the Briton's fate, and bitter questions escape his mouth: "and thou, O Clessámmor! where is thy dwelling in the wind? Has the youth forgot his wound? Flies he on clouds with thee?" (Macpherson, 1851, p. 233) The poem ends with an invocation to the sun, and reflections on the transience of life.

The first thing that is clearly visible in the presentation of Britons in this poem is their essential similarity to the Celts, and even insistence on the necessary union of the two races. Although those living south of Lora are "strangers" and enemies, it does not exclude mutual hospitality and understanding. In fact, the marriage of Clessámmor and Moina may reflect the union between Scotland and England. However, this reading of the text provokes many questions and reveals a picture more complex than it may seem.

Superficially, we can agree with the statements posed by, e.g., Richard Sher, that *Poems of Ossian* strives to create the picture of a powerful Scot dominating the weak English (Sher, 1982, pp. 58–60). It is true that legendary Fingal overshadows any other character in the tales, be it English, Scandinavian or Irish, asserting Scottish national superiority. The Britons of Balclutha are defeated in the battles with the Celts Clessámmor, Calthon and Fingal. Many of them are presented as haughty and violent. The beautiful Moina and her son are eventually bound to Morven, interred in Scottish, rather than English, soil. In this particular tale, however, Macpherson seems to promote the connection of the two races and shows how clinging to the past can be destructive for both, and especially for the nascent British identity.

Carthon, more than a purely "English" enemy, represents "Britishness", resulting from the union. Ancient hostilities, traditional distrust and private quarrels impede successful cooperation and lead to a tragedy. The warrior, rather than kill his father (Scot), chooses to be annihilated

1. "Celt" and "Gael" are interchangeable in Macpherson (Macpherson, 1851, p. 61).

himself. From Macpherson's presentation we can conclude that neither England nor Scotland can live without each other. Both Clessámmor and Moina pass away to become ghosts, whose salvation is doubtful. The ideal Briton, who seems a threat to the culture of Fingal's land, is in fact its very son. Rather than close themselves in their "noble pride" (Macpherson, 1851, p. 230), the two nations should recognize their common ancestry.

## Lathmon: the "prince of generous sentiment"

It is true that the poem "Lathmon" comes in the collection rather late, inserted between two great tales, "Fingal" and "Temora", but in terms of its importance for the image of Britons, it should be analysed before the other two. The title hero is a British prince, the son of Nuäth, the king of Dunlathmon. He decides to raid Selma, the capital of Morven, in the absence of Fingal, engaged in fighting in Ireland. The poems begins with admonishment of this type of behavior—"Will the daughters of Morven fight?" (Macpherson, 1851, p. 358). What is more, when he spots the returning Fingal, he escapes with his troops, having previously met the chief in battle and having suffered defeat (Macpherson, 1851, p. 359). Lathmon, then, is initially presented as a coward, looking for easy victories.

It prepares the scene for the later dilemmas faced by Ossian himself, who took part in the expedition against Lathmon and who suggested slaying the warriors in their sleep. However, he was stopped from doing so by Gaul, his friend. In fact, the poem deals much more with the exploits of young Ossian and Gaul than with Lathmon himself. The arrival of the Britons becomes the occasion for the fledgling warriors to prove their battle prowess. Gaul, whose imagination of the war has been formed by the tales of his father and Fingal's bards, insists that they assault the enemy's camp only by themselves. The plan is carried out: the mere sound of Ossian's shield strikes fear in the British hosts.

> I struck thrice my echoing shield. The startling foe arose. We rushed on in the sound of our arms. Their crowded steps fly over the heath. They thought that the mighty Fingal was come. The strength of their arms withered away. The sound of their flight was like that of flame, when it rushes through the blasted groves. (Macpherson, 1851, p. 364)

However, when the two Gaelic warriors see wrathful Lathmon gathering his army on the nearby hill and preparing to strike, they decide to return to Fingal. Lathmon has a chance to slay Ossian and Gaul as they retreat, but refuses to do it: it would be disgraceful to send the army against only two men. He decides to challenge Ossian himself, but the

bard defeats him easily. The British prince does not surrender till the end, deprived even of his spear and shield. Only the intervention of Gaul saves his life. It is then that Lathmon, moved to tears, acknowledges the superiority of the race of Fingal:

> Why should Lathmon fight against the first of men? Your souls are beams from heaven; your swords the flames of death! Who can equal the renown of the heroes, whose deeds are so great in youth? O that ye were in the halls of Nuäth, in the green dwelling of Lathmon! Then would my father say that his son did not yield to the weak. (Macpherson, 1851, p. 367)

The tale ends with the feast and Fingal's speech, sending the defeated prince back to his own country.

The plot renders, then, a rather straightforward answer to the question of the presentation of the British/English enemy. In military terms they are inferior to the Gaelic/Scottish warriors, and are driven by the vain search for fame, rather than being moved by "generous sentiments" and chivalric values. Still, even here the picture is not fully derogatory. Macpherson very carefully delineates the features of Ossian that correspond to Lathmon's not entirely noble behaviour. Not only does the son of Fingal avoid challenging the enemy, looking back to his mighty father, but is a step from an unnecessary—and shameful—killing of the disarmed or sleeping foes. This counterbalances the negative portrayal of Lathmon.

Furthermore, it can be conjectured that at the time of Macpherson Lathmon was not actually perceived by the readers as aggressive and cowardly, but as a "prince of generous sentiment". The fragment of Hugh Blair's *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* is revelatory as to the contemporary reading of the poem:

> […] episodes in that strain of tender melancholy which seems to have been the great delight of Ossian and the bards of his age. Lathmon is peculiarly distinguished by high generosity of sentiment. This is carried so far, particularly in the refusal of Gaul, on one side, to take the advantage of a sleeping foe; and of Lathmon, on the other, to overpower by numbers the two young warriors as to recall into one's mind the manners of chivalry; some resemblance to which may perhaps be suggested by other incidents in this collection of poems. (Blair, 1851, p. 140)

The values of chivalry become the bridge of understanding between the two warring nations, the Britons and the Gaels, and they meet together at feast. Macpherson yet again finishes on a positive note. The strife is over and the future holds inevitable mutual agreement. However, in this tale the countries remain impervious. Lathmon is sent back to his country

and Fingal declares not to engage in battle with him. This cease-fire reinforces the image of the strong cultural divide between the countries and the willingness to safeguard separate identities. The dialogue, held on a plane of mutually recognized values and carried out according to the universally accepted manners, does not necessitate the domination of one culture over the other.

## Oithona: "Nuäth's mournful daughter"

The poem "Oithona" comes at the beginning of the collection, and thus before "Lathmon". The latter, however, introduces the heroes that are important to "Oithona" and this is why I decided to reverse the order of the poems for the purposes of the analysis. After the lost battle, Lathmon is escorted back to Dunlathmon by Gaul. It is unclear which battle is meant: Macpherson refers to "a preceding poem", but in fact the preceding poems in the collection do not mention Lathmon at all. However, judging from the events in "Lathmon", it is safe to assume that "Oithona" is the sequel to the story analysed above.

Again, as in "Carthon", Macpherson chooses to begin *in medias res*, filling in the gaps in the reader's knowledge with a short introduction. He states that Gaul was received hospitably at Nuäth's court and was promised the hand of his daughter, Oithona. The young Gaelic warrior and Lathmon's sister were in love and the date of their marriage was fixed, when suddenly Gaul was sent for by Fingal to take part in his wars in the country of Britons. At the same time, Nuäth and Lathmon were engaged in fight, and Oithona was left alone at Dunlathmon, awaiting the arrival of her betrothed. It was then that she was abducted and imprisoned in a cave on Tromáthon Island by Dunrommath, a Scandinavian Orkney chief, in revenge for her rejecting him.

The poem begins with Gaul returning from the wars only to find Dunlathmon gloomy and empty. He despairs because he does not know where to look for his maid. At night Oithona comes to him as a dream vision:

> Her hair was loose and disordered; her lovely eye rolled deep in tears. Blood stained her snowy arm. The robe half hid the wound of her breast. She stood over the chief, and her voice was feebly heard. "Sleeps the son of Morni, he that was lovely in the eyes of Oithona? Sleeps Gaul at the distant rock, and the daughter of Nuäth low? The sea rolls round the dark isle of Tromáthon. I sit in my tears in the cave! Nor do I sit alone, O Gaul! the dark chief of Cuthal is there. He is there in the rage of his love. What can Oithona do?" (Macpherson, 1851, p. 244)

With the first rays of light, Gaul departs to Tromáthon, only to find his beloved after three days resolved not to survive the burden of grief and shame. Macpherson uses the ambiguous word "rape" to speak about the abduction, but from the hints dropped in the poem, and from Oithona's behaviour, the reader can easily judge that she was defiled by Dunrommath. Amid mutual tears and persuasions, the lovers see the Scandinavian chief approaching with his army. Gaul faces the foe, while Oithona retires to a cave, where she dresses up as a man and enters the battle, looking for death.

Dunrommath is slain immediately by the hand of Gaul, and the enemies disperse, chased by a rain of arrows from the Gaelic side. When the warrior returns to the cave in search of Oithona, he finds a young warrior, leaning against a rock, mortally wounded with an arrow. As he offers to examine him, it turns out to be Oithona. She passes her helmet to Gaul and asks him to return it to her brother. When she dies, Gaul raises her tomb and returns to Morven, where Ossian sings a commemorative song about the maiden.

As can be seen, Macpherson in this tale employs and completely inverts the metaphor of rape, so common in the discourse accompanying the discussion of the Anglo-Scottish union. Here, Morven/Scotland is represented by the masculine principle, whereas Dunlathmon/England is assigned the feminine one. Oithona, the British princess, the marriage with whom could have secured a cease-fire with Lathmon, is raped by the Scandinavian chief. In the equation, then, appears a third factor, complicating the picture of the relations between the two "auld enemies".

It is important to realize what happens in the background of the tragic history of the star-crossed lovers. The rape of Oithona takes place because of neglect on the part of both Gaels and Britons. While Dunlathmon is being devastated, Gaul and Fingal raid another part of the British kingdom, and Nuäth and Lathmon also fight their wars (in Duthórmoth, the location unclear). Engaged in the "wars of their fathers"—age-old feuds fuelled by tradition—the two parties forget to take care of the vulnerable, leaving them easy prey to the foreign foe. Macpherson seems to suggest that the communication between Scotland and England is fragile. If the countries do not abandon old enmities and do not focus on cooperation, the common Britannia/Oithona will die a suicidal death.

One more element in the tale is worth considering. Oithona looks for death on the battlefield, but it may be supposed that she never joins the battle. Dunrommath falls so soon that Gaul's warriors send only arrows after his army. The use of bows is not mentioned on the Scandinavian part, and it gives the disquieting impression that Oithona was mortally wounded by the Gaelic side. Gaul is clearly associated with this type of

weapon, if only for the fact of his wielding the huge bow of Morni: "Son of Leth, bring the bows of our fathers! the sounding quiver of Morni! Let our three warriors bend the yew. Ourselves will lift the spear." (Macpherson, 1851, pp. 246–7)

In this case Gaul himself has an alibi—his bow is wielded by three other warriors, whereas he engages in hand-to-hand combat with Dunrommath. Yet, it lets the reader assume that his lover was actually killed by his companions. This situation has a distinct flavour of admonishment towards the Scots: the negligence of the warriors and the unnecessary killing of the fleeing enemy may reflect the lack of careful attention and willingness to work on the overcoming of the traditional enmities. Oithona dies, then, because of double neglect, leaving Gaul never fully healed from this wound. Her helmet is passed to Lathmon—at least symbolically—so the two nations are separated again, with the memorial of the failure of the union being the "narrow house" on Tromáthon.

## Calthon and Colmal: "the lovely strangers"

The tale about Calthon and Colmal can also be found in the first part of the collection, preceded by "Carthon" and "Oithona". Ossian reminisces about the days of his youth and recounts one of his expeditions to the country of Britons. It was provoked by the feuds among the British princes, generous Rathmor and evil Dunthalmo. The latter raided Rathmor's hall, devastated it, and carried away his two sons, Calthon and Colmar. They were raised in Dunthalmo's keep, together with his own daughter, Colmal. When they came of age, however, they began planning revenge on Dunthalmo. Their plot is uncovered, and they are imprisoned in separate caves, awaiting execution.

Colmal, however, in love with Calthon, one night disguises herself in a man's armor and frees the warrior. She persuades him to leave his brother in prison and implore succor at Fingal's court in Morven. When they present their case to the gathering of Gaelic warriors, the war on Teutha (Tweed) is unanimously declared. Ossian is chosen to lead the expedition to the country of Britons, and given the task of freeing Colmar and restoring peace and justice.

Ossian comes to Teutha only to find Dunthalmo's army already awaiting him, with bound Colmar, who is killed in sight of his brother and the bard. The murder enrages Calthon, which worries Colmal, who understands that either her father or her lover must die. The latter rushes into battle twice to retrieve the body of Colmar. On his second try he is captured, and Colmal, who followed him, returns to report to Ossian. The bard receives her very harshly:

> Colmal stood before me in tears. She told of the chief of Clutha: thrice the spear fell from her hand. My wrath turned against the stranger; for my soul trembled for Calthon. “Son of the feeble hand!” I said, “do Teutha’s warriors fight with tears? The battle is not won with grief; nor dwells the sigh in the soul of war. Go to the deer of Carmun, to the lowing herds of Teutha. But leave these arms, thou son of fear! A warrior may lift them in fight.”
>
> I tore the mail from her shoulders. Her snowy breast appeared. She bent her blushing face to the ground. I looked in silence to the chiefs. The spear fell from my hand; the sigh of my bosom rose! But when I heard the name of the maid, my crowding tears rushed down. (Macpherson, 1851, pp. 259–60)

The behaviour of Ossian is dictated by his fear of falling out of favour with Fingal. With both of the sons of Rathmor dead, his mission would be a failure, and his father was known to be very demanding of his chiefs. Once he realizes, however, Colmal’s sex and her unhappy plight, he adheres to another Fingalian principle—the “generous sentiment”—and uses the occassion to motivate his warriors to fight.

The closing of the tale is surprisingly brief. The bard curtly states that he killed Dunthalmo, freed Calthon and gave him Colmal in marriage. They make their seat at Theuta, and restore peace to this part of the land of Britons.

Most of “Calthon and Colmal” takes place in the British territory (although Clyde and Tweed are normally associated with Scotland) and Britons are the main actors. Selma’s intervention has the character of a stabilizing mission, supported by the moral motive of aiding the weak. By having the positive characters associated with the River Clyde, closer to Morven’s location (Wilson, 1882, p. 98), Macpherson underlines the gentleness and nobility of Celts, as opposed to Germans and Scandinavians (and the English, as discussed above). Dunthalmo’s cruelty is juxtaposed with the sensibility of Ossian and Colmal.

Yet again, the Britons are too weak to manage their own matters and they need to solicit the aid of the powerful neighbour. Moreover, Fingal again does not deem it proper to engage himself in the battle over the feuds of the lesser chiefs, sending some of his other warriors instead. It is the second time that Ossian plays a major role in the conflict with the Britons. Although he is not the most renowned of Fingal’s warriors, his strength is more than enough to deal with the situation.

Calthon and Colmal’s presentation as “lovely strangers” seems to echo the portrayal of Lathmon. Their behaviour may seem dubious—by leaving Colmar in the hands of enemies, they are at least partially responsible for his death. However, they represent the nobility of feelings, so much promoted in the world of Ossian and in the eighteenth-century

Age of Sensibility. Their love, suffering and sacrifice, especially that of Colmal, seem to provide a counterbalance to their essential weakness and ineptitude.

## Concluding remarks

As can be seen, Macpherson's Britons are "feeble" strangers, more often than not seeking the help of Fingal and alliance with him. This definitely fanned the pride of the Scottish of the eighteenth century, still smarting from the heavy military, political and cultural losses they suffered on the part of the English. Against the brutal and sturdy Anglo-Saxon hero Macpherson juxtaposes a sensitive Celt, creating a paragon of conduct in accordance with the contemporary fashion. However, the writer avoids openly divisive statements, aware that at that point in history it was peace rather than conflict that should be sought. The Gothic barbarity is embodied mostly by the Scandinavian characters, according to the popular associations of the times (Weinbrot, 1994, pp. 478–500). He underlines common ancestry and values, creating his British characters in the likeness of the powerful and noble Celtic warriors. The sensitivity of Oithona, the sacrifice of Colmal and Carthon, and the chivalry of Lathmon belong to the set of Fingalian values propagated by the poems. While placing Morven at the centre of the work, the author shows Scotland, especially at the times of its eighteenth-century Renaissance, as the political and cultural nexus, radiating its influence on all of its neighbours. At the same time, he points out realistically that the age of great heroes is gone—now the culture of the "feeble" grows over the tombs of the mighty, which addressed the feelings of the majority of his Scottish audience, facing the threat of English domination.

On the whole, Macpherson meanders between national pride and the increasing feeling that further fighting would be deleterious to both sides of the conflict. In his poems he portrays the Scottish and the English at the point of redefining their relationship. Macpherson undertakes the issues of identity, union, anxieties and ambiguity connected with the search for common ground, in spite of the history of resentment looming large in the background. He succeeds at creating a picture which reaches out both to the supporters and to the opponents of the union. His vision of Britons and Celts replays the one put forward by John Home in his *Douglas* (1756):

> A river here, there an ideal line,
> By fancy drawn, divides the sister kingdoms.

> On each side dwells a people similar,
> As twins are to each other; valiant both;
> Both for their valour famous thro’ the world. (Sher, 1982, p. 56)

In fact, in “Calthon and Colmal” Macpherson very plastically shows the River Tweed (Teutha) as such a line. On one bank there stand Ossian, Calthon and Colmal, fighting for love and justice, while on the other, facing them, are Dunthalmo and his army, representing cruelty and barbarity. Colmar, whom the sensitive Celts and Britons attempt to save, is killed at the very border. His death, along with the similar deaths of Carthon and Oithona, seems to warn against the consequences of further conflict. Continuing to uphold the “ideal line by fancy drawn” and the mental framework built on prejudices may result in disaster. Macpherson does not solely blame the British/English for the difficulties in forging common “Britishness”. The Celtic/Scottish characters are just as guilty. Carthon is killed by his father, Clessàmor. Oithona falls by an arrow which is likely Celtic.

It can be said, then, that Macpherson uses “tales of the times of old” to talk about the present. He signals that the ages of conflict are gone, and the future of “Britannia” depends on the attitude to the common history. The portrayal of Britons in his poems remains in accordance with the views propagated in his times. However, he expresses them in his own, original way, drawing straight from the political turmoil of the times. He prepares ground for Walter Scott’s *Waverley* novels, which—written from the perspective of more than a century after the union—provide perhaps more lucid material when it comes to the questions of the British identity (e.g., Pittock, 2005, pp. 232–5). Macpherson manages to render in his poems the sense of suspension between the old and the new, the Scottish, the English and the British. This open-ended quality of *Ossian* provokes the reflection about the “auld enemies” and their common future without yielding to an easy interpretation. The ambiguous picture he paints seems an appropriate response to the confused sense of identity at that period. The decision about the fate of “another race” that shall arise (Macpherson, 1851, p. 492), whether it will be bloody or peaceful, is left to the future generations of both nations.

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