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Ossian and Visual Art – Mislaid and Rediscovered

Murdo Macdonald

Abstract

The pioneering Ossian exhibitions held in Paris and Hamburg in 1974 had as their focus the response of northern European artists to James Macpherson's work around 1800. Because of the substantial nature of those exhibitions, and the lack of any major Ossian exhibition since, it has been easy to assume that one needs look no further for responses to Ossian in visual art. This paper considers why it is necessary to take a wider perspective. Alongside the widely acknowledged work of the French painter Girodet, note is taken of work of little acknowledged Ossian artists such as the English landscape painter J. M. W. Turner and his close contemporary the Italian sculptor and graphic artist Luigi Zandomenighi. The research was given particular impetus by the rediscovery in 2013 of Turner's *Ossian* painting from 1802, *Ben Lomond Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller - Vide Ossian's 'War of Caros'*. Thanks to the Cesarotti Project at the University of Padua, the identification of that Turner can be complemented here by an awareness of Luigi Zandomenighi's substantial set of Ossian images printed in Venice in 1817. The paper draws to a conclusion with a discussion is the reuse by Italian artists of a

work attributed to the eighteenth-century Scottish artist, Alexander Runciman, and concludes by noting the significance of Ossian for Celtic Revival art.

The background: exhibitions in France and Germany

The substantial nature of the Ossian exhibitions held at the Grand Palais in Paris from February to April 1974 and subsequently at the Kunsthalle in Hamburg in May and June of the same year made it easy to assume one needed to look no further for any major Romantic or post-Romantic interpretation of Ossian in visual art.¹ The limitation of these exhibitions, however, was their almost exclusive focus on northern European artists working around 1800, indeed that was made explicit in the German title, *Ossian und die Kunst um 1800*. Not much attention was paid to the significant Italian contribution to Ossianic visual culture; and there was no mention of later Scottish and Irish works, such as those of the Celtic Revival of the 1890s. There was no account of twentieth-century responses to the bard, except for a passing mention in the German catalogue of an Ossian-inspired graphic work by Max Ernst from 1972. Even within the ambit of Northern European art around 1800 some important work was not present, either because they weren't known

¹ Hanna Hohl and H el ene Toussaint, *Ossian*. (Paris: Minist ere des affaires culturelles / Editions des mus ees nationaux, 1974); Hanna Hohl and H el ene Toussaint, *Ossian und die Kunst um 1800*, Munich: Prestel, 1974).

about at the time, as in the case of J. M. W. Turner's Ossian painting from 1802; or because the medium of presentation meant the work could not be easily transported, as in the case of the large-scale decorative scheme of James Barry from the late 1770s.² Furthermore, there was little interest in the engraved work that distinguishes so many illustrated editions of Ossian (although the timeline of the German catalogue alludes to some of those editions). What is still needed over forty years later is further research to complement and extend the ground-breaking work of these shows. The fact is that major galleries in the United Kingdom still fail to take seriously the depiction of Ossian, both as an artistic endeavour in its own right, and as a significant influence on much sublime landscape painting, even when the topic of such imagery is not expressly Ossianic.

A powerful reminder of the significance and potential developments of those Paris and Hamburg exhibitions came in the form of a retrospective on the French painter Anne-Louis Girodet, held at the Louvre from September 2005 to January 2006, Ossianic work was a core theme of this show.³ Over and above the exhibition itself, at least twenty-five images and a substantial amount of text in the catalogue are devoted to Girodet's Ossian paintings and drawings.⁴ The catalogue made a major contribution to the available published images of Ossian, and at the same time

² For more on Barry's contribution, see Sebastian Mitchell, 'Ossian and Ossianic Parallelism in James Barry's Works', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 23 (2008), p.94–120; and Murdo Macdonald, 'Ossian and Art: Scotland into Europe via Rome', in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), p.395–6.

³ For a sense of the significance of the *Ossian* element of this exhibition see Donald Kuspit's *Artnet* review: <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit8-16-06.asp>. Accessed 1 October 2014.

⁴ One of the ten catalogue essays is also devoted to it: Susan Libby, "Je préfère le bizarre au plat": *Ossian et l'originalité*, in Sylvain Bellenger (ed.), *Girodet 1767–1824* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p.137–42.

provided a commentary on relationship of that work to the other literary themes which Girodet explored. These range from Racine to Virgil to Sappho. In addition, the catalogue includes an extensive body of portraits from the years immediately after the French Revolution, including that of his friend and fellow Ossian enthusiast, Chateaubriand. The commissioning of Girodet's major Ossian painting in 1801 (exhibited 1802) for the decoration of the grand salon of Malmaison has been widely acknowledged.⁵ It is important to take note also of Girodet's Ossian drawings from the 1790s. The Louvre exhibition displayed these to good effect and the catalogue discussed them in an informative fashion. Also considered in the catalogue is Girodet's friendship with the naturalist and novelist Bernadin de St Pierre, and an image is included of his illustration for St Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, dating from 1806.⁶ That novel was published in 1788. St Pierre was a follower of Rousseau, and *Paul et Virginie* explores the virtues of nature, and of the nature and modern society, in which nature is steadily losing ground.⁷ In the section of *The French Revolution* devoted to 'Printed Paper' Thomas Carlyle wrote of the novel: 'there rises melodiously, as it were, the wail of a moribund world: everywhere wholesome Nature in unequal conflict with diseased, perfidious Art; cannot escape from it in the lowest hut, in the remotest island of the sea. [...]. Yet, on the whole, our good Sainte-Pierre is musical, poetical though most morbid: we will call his Book the swan-song of old dying France.'⁸

⁵ See Bellenger (ed.), *Girodet*, p.234.

⁶ *Passage du Torrent*, engraved by B. Roger for the deluxe edition published by P. Didot L'Aine in Paris in 1806. See Bellenger (ed.), *Girodet*, p.158.

⁷ Taken together Macpherson and St Pierre lead one to Fenimore Cooper and thence to Whitman. That American dimension is also represented in illustrated editions *Ossian*, beginning with the wood engravings of Alexander Anderson in 1804.

⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, 3 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1837), vol. I.53.

Following Carlyle and his lyrical use of pleonasm, one might describe Macpherson's translations of Ossian as the swansong of old dying Scotland. But one might also regard Ossianic lament as the first sign of the Gaelic cultural revival, if only in the condition of its accommodation with the Anglophone culture of the oppressor. Even with his Germanic leanings, Carlyle was certainly part of mainstream Anglophone culture, and he showed little sign of goodwill towards Ossian.⁹ It is something of an irony to find Carlyle using the word 'environment' in its modern sense via his translation of a passage in which Goethe considers the poetry of Ossian among other works.¹⁰ This is 'environmental' approach is interesting both in terms of *Ossian* and *Paul et Virginie* for both are early works of what one might call ecological literature in the sense that the natural world is a main component of the works, rather than merely a backdrop to the action.

Paul et Virginie was, like Ossian, an international sensation, but whereas Ossian interrogates the uneasiness of its Enlightenment present through a legendary past, *Paul et Virginie* interrogates that same present through its exotic geography. St Pierre's setting for his novel was Ile de France in the Indian Ocean. The island is known to us today under its earlier Dutch name of Mauritius, a name to which it reverted when it became British rather than French – in the imperial sense – in

⁹ See, for example, Thomas Carlyle to Robert Mitchell, 14 July 1819; DOI: 10.1215/lt-18190714-TC-RM-01; *CL* 1:188–192, Duke University, Carlyle Letters Online <http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/cgi/content/full/1/1/lt-18190714-TC-RM-01?maxtoshow=&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&fulltext=mitchell+1819&searchid=1&FIRSTINDEX=0&resourcetype=HWCIT> [Accessed 13 July 2015].

¹⁰ Ralph Jessop, 'Coinage of the Term Environment: A Word Without Authority and Carlyle's Displacement of the Mechanical Metaphor', *Literature Compass* 9:11 (2012), p.708–20.

1810 during the Napoleonic wars. To find Girodet as a visual interpreter of both Macpherson and St Pierre is therefore no surprise. A letter from Girodet to St Pierre, from about 1802, shows the possibilities that Girodet felt had opened up for him by the exploration of Ossian.¹¹ He writes of having 'no model' and that freedom makes his *Ossian Receiving the Generals of the Republic* something of a one-off, even today. Matthew Craske has commented on the picture that 'the composition flouted every classical "rule" [...] David is reported to have wondered out loud after seeing the painting whether Girodet had lost his mind.'¹²

J. M. W. Turner's interest in Ossian

The 1802 work of the English artist J. M. W. Turner makes an illuminating comparison with that of Girodet. Turner's Ossian painting, *Ben Lomond Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller – Vide Ossian's 'War of Caros'* is contemporary with Girodet's *Ossian Receiving the Generals of the Republic*. Both were begun in 1801 and were exhibited in 1802. There is an obvious contrast in the approach of the artists, as Turner was painting a landscape and Girodet a dreamscape. Yet both painters are using Macpherson's Ossian to extend the boundaries of their discipline. Girodet's letter to St Pierre could hardly have made that intention clearer. Similarly, Turner's Ossian image helped him establish the conventions of modern landscape painting. Just as Girodet's Ossian painting helped to define his thinking on style and form in this period of his career, so did this picture for Turner. Indeed, *Ben Lomond*

¹¹ The full text is given in P. A. Coupin, *Oeuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson, peintre d'histoire; suivies de sa correspondance*, 2 vol, (Paris: J. Renouard), vol 2, p. 280-281. An English version can be found, without attribution to translator, in Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves (eds.), *Artists on Art* (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), p.212-13.

¹² Matthew Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.275.

Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller was of such significance to the English artist that he chose it as one of the group of oil paintings to be exhibited in 1802 at the Royal Academy. His modern biographer, James Hamilton, has commented that it 'was of the utmost importance to Turner that he should get these paintings right, as this would be his first appearance at the Royal Academy as a full Academician.'¹³ Hamilton suggests that Turner was trying to achieve a psychological balance between these oil paintings, but he assumes that the Ossianic work is now not only lost, but it was also in the medium of watercolour; and so he does not treat it as part of this group in oils. We can now see that *Ben Lomond Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller* acts as a pivotal work between Turner's seascapes and his imaginary landscapes. It has a similar reality of location as two of the oil paintings on show in that exhibition of 1802, *Fishermen on a Lee-Shore in Squally Weather* and *Ships Bearing up for Anchorage*; and it shares a sense of poetical drama with the other two oils, *Jason* and *The Tenth Plague of Egypt*.

Turner's Ossian painting had been lost – or rather assigned various incorrect titles – for the best part of two hundred years. Recent research, however, has identified *Ben Lomond Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller* as one of the paintings in the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.¹⁴ [Fig. 1] The potential significance of this painting has always been clear in terms of Ossian and art.¹⁵ It is also important in terms of Turner's oeuvre, for it is one of the earliest oil paintings

¹³ James Hamilton, *Turner: A Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), p.69.

¹⁴ For the positive identification of Turner's Ossian work see Murdo Macdonald and Eric Shanes, 'Turner and Ossian's The Traveller', *Turner Society News* (Autumn 2013), p.4–7.

¹⁵ See, for example, Macdonald, 'Ossian and Art'; and Murdo Macdonald, 'Art and the Scottish Highlands: An Ossianic Perspective', *Interfaces: Image, Text, Language* 27 (2008), p.75–88.

in which he responds to poetry through a landscape that he had actually seen himself. Such an immediate and material response to poetry was to become one of the defining themes of Turner's career. By the time he painted his Ossian work, he had completed *Aeneas and the Sibyl, Lake Avernus*; his first picture produced in response to his reading of Virgil. This Virgilian episode was painted in about 1798. Turner used a real setting even if it was not one he had actually visited himself. The painting was based on a sketch by his patron Richard Colt Hoare. *Ben Lomond Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller* can be interpreted as a kind of declaration of intent by the artist, a determination to use his own first-hand perception and his contemporary sketches as the basis for his prospective imaginative Marian vistas, such a *Lake Avernus: Aeneas and the Cumaean Sybil* (1814 or 1815, again for Richard Colt Hoare), rather than relying on preparatory sketches produced by other hands.

The most famous of Turner's paintings of Lake Avernus is *The Golden Bough*, dating from 1834. Just as Turner painted Italy with sensitivity to the southern European quality of its light and culture he painted Scotland with sensitivity to its northernness and in both cases he picked up strongly on mythological, legendary, historical and poetic material. In an Italian context, he painted *The Golden Bough* and in a Scottish context he painted *Staffa: Fingal's Cave*.¹⁶ Having established the identity of Turner's 1802 work, one can note the balance of north and south in his career some thirty years earlier, again involving Macpherson's Ossian on the one hand and Virgil's *Aeneid* on the other.

¹⁶ See Murdo Macdonald, 'Art as an Expression of Northernness: The Highlands of Scotland', *Visual Culture in Britain* 11:3 (2010), p.355–71.

Sebastian Mitchell has argued for a specifically Ossianic interpretation of *Staffa: Fingal's Cave* (1832), rather than merely seeing it as a by-product of Turner's tour to generate illustrations for the poetry and prose of Scott in 1831.¹⁷ [Fig. 2] That is very much my position here. I have noted elsewhere that while one might regard Turner's view of *Loch Katrine* as a direct response to Scott, it is hard to look at his vision of *Glencoe* without feeling far closer to Ossian than Scott. Turner's *Glencoe* is also interesting, because although it is a small watercolour made in order to be engraved by William Miller for the *Prose Works* of Scott, it shares a great deal as a work of art with his oil painting of *Staffa: Fingal's Cave*. In both cases Turner uses both cloud and smoke to underpin the Ossianic credentials of the work. In the *Staffa* work, vapour draws our view to the Fingal's Cave. In the *Glencoe* work it points to the location of Ossian's Cave, high on the cliffs at the western end of the glen. In the light of the discovery of the 1802 work, there can be no doubt that Turner's initial literary reference point for Highland landscape was the translations of James Macpherson, and that one can see the influence of Ossianic poetry consciously present in his work throughout the remainder of his career.

We can now provide a more extensive account of Turner's later work in the light of the clear significance to him of his earlier Ossianic work. We might note also that Turner uses a view of Ben Lomond to illustrate one of Samuel Rogers' *Poems*, 'Loch Lomond' which refers to Ossian. The image was engraved by William Miller, and

¹⁷ Sebastian Mitchell, 'Celtic Postmodernism: Ossian and Contemporary Art', *Translation and Literature* 22 (2013), p.408. Also see Sebastian Mitchell, *Visions of Britain: 1730–1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.220–32.

published in 1835.¹⁸ The setting of the Miller engraving is a few miles further south from that of the 1802 painting, but the similarity is evident. So, Turner employs almost the same view to illustrate Rogers's Ossianic allusion, as he does with direct reference to Macpherson's translations of the poems from some thirty years earlier. A difference between the settings is that the visual exaggerations of the 1802 work, which Ruskin called 'Turnerian topography' were hardly evident, whereas they were a key feature of Turner's mature style by the 1830s. Such Turnerian topography can be seen also in the exaggerations of the Glencoe and Staffa works.

The identification of Turner's 1802 work underlines the importance of Ossian to the iconography of the Scottish Highlands in general. Turner painted his work eight years before Scott published *Lady of the Lake*, a work that can easily be assumed to be the literary progenitor of all nineteenth-century Highland imagery.¹⁹ The detachment of Turner's painting from its title sheds an interesting sidelight on the cultural-political dynamics of the Ossian controversy. One can note that the painting lost its title, but not its artist. This confusion over the painting's name and subject matter presumably occurred at the time of Turner's death. For some of its later documented existence, the picture was referred to as *The Trossachs*, a mountain area contiguous with its actual location. For reasons which are still not entirely clear, the location then moved southward and westward, as the painting

¹⁸ Vivien E. Williams of the University of Glasgow drew my attention to the *Ossian* reference in Rogers' poem, in relation to Turner's image, in her paper 'The Bagpipe: A Romantic Symbol of Ossianic Northernness', given at *Macpherson's Ossianic Legacy* at Tallan Ros and Iona Gallery, Kingussie, Badenoch, April 18–19, 2015.

¹⁹ See, for example, Macdonald, 'Art as an Expression of Northernness', p.355–71. See also Murdo Macdonald, 'Rethinking Scott, his Literary Predecessors and the Imagery of the Highlands', in Ian Brown (ed.), *Literary Tourism: The Trossachs and Walter Scott* (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International / Association of Scottish Literary Studies, 2012), p.124–32.

ended up speculatively listed in the Fitzwilliam collection as *Welsh Mountain Landscape*, before it was conclusively identified in 2013.²⁰

The correct identification of the painting as an explicit episode from Ossian in a specific Highland setting thus necessitates a significant adjustment to the catalogue of Turner's work. It links the Fitzwilliam oil painting with a group of Turner's most powerful analytical drawings of the period, what Ruskin called his 'Scottish Pencils'. And, as we have already seen, the painting forms part of the first group of oil paintings exhibited by Turner at the Royal Academy in 1802, after he was elected as an Academician. The picture can, therefore, be considered to have had an agenda-setting significance for the artist. In addition, the painting sheds light on Turner's early attitude to the depiction of poetry, which he was already developing through his responses not only to Ossian, but also to Akenside and to Virgil. In due course, the artist was to find full expression of this defining aspect of his work in his engagement with the works of Byron, Rogers, Campbell, Scott, and Milton. Furthermore, *Ben Lomond Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller* provides an Ossianic context for a number of the 'bard' drawings in Turner's sketchbooks c. 1798–1802, precisely because we can now see that the artist used them as preparatory sketches for the illustration of the episode from the 'War of Caros' in 1802.²¹ This mislaid and rediscovered work by Turner thus widens our perspective not only with respect to Ossian and art, but also with respect to Turner's development as a landscape artist.

²⁰ For evidence of the earlier title, and awareness and rejection of Gage's suggestion, see the entry on *Welsh Mountain Landscape* on page 158 of the catalogue of *British Landscape Paintings from the Fitzwilliam Museum*, exhibited at the Isetan Museum of Art, Tokyo, 17 September to 20 October, 1992.

²¹ Also see Gage, 'Turner and Stourhead', note 51; p.86-7.

The Italian Dimension: Luigi Zandomeneghi

One can extend this consideration of the 'mislaidd and rediscovered' dimension of Ossian and art, through the work of a close contemporary of Turner, the Italian sculptor and graphic artist Luigi Zandomeneghi (1778–1850). His work was never lost as such, but almost no attention was paid to it until the Italian art historian Fernando Mazzocca's discussed it in 2002.²² Zandomeneghi was a Venetian artist of major importance, and his set of Ossian designs is the most comprehensive of any published set of illustrations of the bard. [Fig. 3] He was a pupil Antonio Canova (1757–1822) in Rome; and he had a distinguished career as a sculptor in Venice. Among his notable works is the Tomb of Titian. Zandomeneghi's Ossianic work consists of a bound portfolio of forty-eight designs complete with substantial descriptive texts stitched into the volume on separate sheets. The images express the full range of Ossianic experience from pastoral scenes of bardic music making, to violent battles, ghostly encounters, and, of course, prophetic dreams. The designs were then engraved by Felice Zuliani.²³

Zandomeneghi's Ossian works attracted significant attention at the time, for example in the English-language publication, *The Literary Panorama and National Register* of 1818, which reported on the prints as follows:

²² Fernando Mazzocca, 'La Fortuna Figurativa di Ossian in Italia Negli Anni Della Restaurazione', in Gennaro Barbarisi and Guilo Carnazzi (eds), *Aspetti dell'Opera e della Fortuna di Melchiorre Cesarotti* (Milano: Cisalpino, 2002), p.835–55.

²³ Luigi Zandomeneghi, *I Canti di Ossian pensieri d'un Anonimo, disegnati, et incise a Contorno*. (Venezia: Guiseppe Battaglia, 1817). A copy was purchased by the British Museum Library and accessioned on 18 March 1869. Eight works from this set of forty-eight are reproduced in Mazzocca, 'Fortuna Figurativa di Ossian'.

Ossian: Subjects for design. / The British public has paid a due tribute of acknowledgement to the subjects in outline composed by Mr. Flaxman from the poems of Homer, and Hesiod, and Dante. / As an honourable object of emulation, a similar series has been composed by Sig. Luigi Zandomeneghi, a member of the Academy of Fine Arts, at Venice, who has taken Ossian for his author; and thus has a Caledonian poet been illustrated by a Venetian artist. The work is entitled *I Canti di Ossian pensieri d'un Anonimo, disegnati, et incise a Contorno*. It is an oblong folio, is accompanied by an explanatory text, and a preface, declaring the author's reasons for adopting that *costume* which he has preferred.²⁴

A consideration of these images enables us to begin to understand the Italian contribution to the wider history of Ossian and art, and thus complements the work of the 1974 catalogues. Zandomeneghi's work is all the more important, because it is the one of the major Ossian visual projects which came to fruition in the early nineteenth century. Two other visual projects of this period, those of Joseph Anton Koch (1768–1839) carried out between 1800 and 1805, and Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) carried out in 1804 and 1805, never got as far as publication, although, in both cases, important preparatory material became part of the visual discourse of Ossian.²⁵ Indeed both Koch and Runge were given substantial

²⁴ *The Literary Panorama and National Register: A Review of Books, Register of Events, Magazine of Varieties: Comprising Interesting Intelligence From The Various Districts of the United Kingdom; The British Connections in ... All Parts of the World, etc., etc.* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1818), p.271–2.

²⁵ Hanna Hohl and Hélène Toussaint, *Ossian*. Catalogue of exhibition at Grand Palais, Paris 15 February to 15 April, 1974. See p.46–58 for Koch's work, and p.61–70 for Runge. With respect to Runge, see also Susanne Strasser-Klotz, *Runge und Ossian: Kunst, Literatur,*

treatment in the Ossian exhibitions of 1974; by comparison Zandomeneghi was not even mentioned.

It is also illuminating to consider another Italian work from the time of Zandomeneghi from the perspective of its international linkages. This is the frontispiece made for Michele Leoni's *Nuovi canti di Ossian* published in Florence in 1813. [Fig. 4] The source of the head of Ossian has been attributed to the Scottish artist, Alexander Runciman, which is known to us in the form of an engraving by John Beugo.²⁶ [Fig. 5] It appeared in the influential 1807 publication by the Highland Society of London, which included both Gaelic and Latin versions of Ossianic material.²⁷ What is less appreciated is that the engraving by Beugo had been published a year earlier in 1806. In fact, it had been published twice in 1806 in different books, and both with different essays by Cesarotti in English translation. The printer/publisher in both cases was William Bulmer of London, who in due course took on the printing work for Highland Society of London publication of 1807. One of the 1806 engravings was used as a frontispiece to Sir John Sinclair's *Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian*, which includes John M'Arthur's English translation of Cesarotti's *Critical Observations on*

Farbenlehre, Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Philosophischen Fakultät I der Universität Regensburg, 2005.

²⁶ John Beugo is most remembered today for his version of Alexander Nasmyth's portrait of the poet Robert Burns, which appeared as the frontispiece of the Edinburgh Edition on Burns' poems, published in 1787.

²⁷ Interest in Runciman's image in Scotland has been significant again since 2002, when Calum Colvin used it as the basis of his exhibition *Ossian: Fragments of Ancient Poetry: Oisein : Bloighean de Sheann Bhàrdachd* at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. The significance of this exhibition in the reassessment of Macpherson's work has been widely recognised, for example through its citation in the introduction and research timeline of *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*. Colvin's immediate source was the image (from 1807) as reproduced in 1997 in Hugh Cheape, 'The Culture and Material Culture of Ossian', *Scotlands* 4:1 (1997), p.17.

the First Book of Fingal. The other was the frontispiece of M'Arthur's translation of Cesarotti's *Historical and Critical Dissertation Respecting the Controversy on the Authenticity of Ossian's Poems*.²⁸ Cesarotti's work makes another appearance in the 1807 publication, and when one takes into account that the 1806 publications of the engravings both had links to work by Cesarotti, it is not surprising that this Runciman image became in due course a standard part of the Italian visual response to Ossian.

The transformation of Beugo's engraving of Ossian

We might also note here the way in which the engraving of 1806 develops. In the frontispiece for the *Leoni*, the Runciman image is abstracted from Beugo's fully articulated engraving, and re-expressed in the form of a neo-classical linearity, almost as though it were a drawing of a marble-relief sculpture. An attribution to Runciman persists, although no reference Beugo is given in Italian.²⁹ It has been pointed out that Leoni published his work as a considered complement to that of Cesarotti.³⁰ By translating John Smith's *Galic Antiquities*, published in 1780, Leoni expanded the corpus of Ossianic poetry available in Italian.³¹ It is all the more

²⁸ John M'Arthur, *A Translation (from the Italian) of the Abbé Cesarotti's Historical and Critical Dissertation Respecting the Controversy on the Authenticity of Ossian's Poems*, by John M'Arthur LL. D. One of the Committee of the Highland Society of London, Appointed to Superintend The Publication of Ossian in the Original Gaelic. With Notes and Observations by the Translator (London: William Bulmer, 1806).

²⁹ I have not yet been able to determine the identity of the engraver. The initials might be 'L F'.

³⁰ Francesca Broggi-Wüthrich, 'From Smith's *Antiquities* to Leoni's *Nuovi Canti*: The Making of the Italian Ossianic Tradition Revisited', in Gaskill (ed.), *Reception of Ossian in Europe*, p.303–34.

³¹ John Smith, *Galic Antiquities: Consisting of a History of the Druids, Particularly Those of Caledonia; A Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian; and a Collection of Ancient Poems, Translated from the Galic of Ullin, Ossian, Orran, &c.* (Edinburgh: T. Cadell & C. Elliot, 1780).

appropriate therefore, to find the frontispiece of Leoni's work developing a response to *Ossian* in the field of visual art, just as Leoni's translations of Smith develop that response from the perspective of literature.

However, the first appearance of Runciman's important image (if we accept the attribution) in a continental European publication is neither in Cesarotti nor in Leoni, but as the frontispiece for a new edition of Le Tourneur's translation into French published in Paris in 1810.³² [Fig. 6] It is likely that this 1810 edition influenced Leoni, because the 1810 edition of Le Tourneur, was issued coupled with Griffet de Labaume and David de Saint-Georges's 1795 translation of Smith's *Galic Antiquities*. The same thing eventually happened in Italy, with Cesarotti and Leoni being issued together.³³ The presence of a version of Runicman's image in Leoni's 1813 publication is consistent with him both using the 1810 edition of Le Tourneur and being aware, as one suspects he would have been, of the M'Arthur translation of Cesarotti's dissertation, as it appeared in both 1806 and 1807.

By the early nineteenth century, Runciman's Ossian image was thus strongly linked to continental Europe, first through its use as a frontispiece for the translation into English of Cesarotti's defence of Ossian, then as a frontispiece for Le Tourneur's French translation of Macpherson, combined with Griffet de Labaume and David de Saint-Georges's 1795 translation of Smith, and then as a frontispiece for Leoni's Italian translation of Smith. A version appears later as a frontispiece for a Milan

³² Pierre Le Tourneur (trans.), *Ossian, Fils de Fingal* (Paris: Dentu, 1810). Beugo's engraving of the image attributed to Runciman is re-engraved by Babet Lefevre.

³³ Cesarotti's and Leoni's translations were published together in Naples in 1827/8. My thanks to Howard Gaskill for pointing this out.

edition of Cesarotti's translation of Macpherson, published in 1828; however, that image no longer credits Runciman. [Fig. 7] It follows, in reverse, the broad detail of the pose and clothing of the earlier versions. The subsidiary image and framing, retained in both *Le Tourneur/Griffet de Labaume, David de St. Georges* (1810) and *Leoni* (1813) has now been lost.³⁴ One can note the further influence of Runciman's depiction of the bard, probably via the Milan edition, on the features of Ossian as shown in the *Ossian and Malvina* paintings by Giacomo Trécourt in 1846 and Guiseppe De Nigris in 1859.

The prehistory of this portrait of the bard Ossian is also of significance, for a precursor can be found in the work of Runciman's teacher in Rome, Gavin Hamilton. His *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus*, painted between 1760 and 1763, has in the background the figure of Achilles' tutor, Phoenix.³⁵ [Fig. 8] The identification of this figure is based on Phoenix's presence at the mourning scene as related in the *Iliad*. There is a close resemblance to the face of Ossian as envisioned by Runciman. The form of words beneath the engraving of 1806 by Beugo can again be noted: 'from a picture supposed to be sketched by Runciman'. So, although there is no definite attribution of this Ossian image to Runciman, the link to Hamilton strengthens the claim for the Beugo attribution. One can note also that Runciman adapted other Hamilton 'Homer' details for his own work. The pose of Fingal in Runciman's etching *Fingal discovering Conban-Carglass* (c. 1772), for example, can be linked to Achilles' pose in Hamilton's *Achilles Vents his Rage on Hector* (1766 or

³⁴ Melchior Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian* (Milano: Presso Gaetano Schieppatti, 1828). The Ossian image is drawn and engraved by C. Cattaneo.

³⁵ See Macdonald, 'An Ossianic Perspective', p. 77.

before). The certainty is that an image originating from a Homeric painting by Hamilton in Rome becomes part and parcel of the Italian visual response to *Ossian*.

James Barry's vision of European literature

For the light it sheds on this European cultural interchange it is worth noting here the response to *Ossian* of Runciman's fellow artist in Rome, the Irishman James Barry. As I noted earlier Barry's work did not figure because of its medium in the 1974 *Ossian* exhibitions. On his return to London from Rome, Barry proposed and eventually carried out a decorative narrative scheme at the Adelphi, London every bit as ambitious as his Scottish friend's *Ossian* murals at Penicuik. This was his *Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture* carried out between 1777 and 1801 for Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Barry's comments on his selection of poets for the scheme's sixth and final image, *Elysium and Tartarus or The State of Final Retribution* (1777–1801) provide a conspectus of the origin and development of European poetry from an eighteenth-century perspective. At its heart is *Ossian*, reclaimed for Ireland by Barry: 'I have accordingly given *Ossian* the Irish harp', he wrote, 'and the lank black hair, and open unreserved countenance peculiar to his country'.³⁶ Particularly interesting in the present context is Barry's treatment of French and Italian poetry:

Next to Homer on the other side sits the great Archbishop of
Cambray [i.e. Fénelon], with that first of all human productions, his
inestimable poem of *Telemachus*; Virgil is standing between, and

³⁶ James Barry, *The Works of James Barry*, 2 vols (London: Cadell & Davies, 1809), vol II.371

leaning on the archbishop's shoulder. The next figures are Tasso, Ariosto, and Dante, the last of whom with his hands on the shoulders of his two descendants, is leaning forward, attending to Homer Behind Dante sits Petrarch, with his hand locked in that of Laura; and between them, and further in the picture, is Giovanni Boccaccio, &c.³⁷

This is the insight of a well-informed Irish painter who had received his training in Rome. The observations associate Ossian with Homer, and at the same time indicating his awareness of the work of Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, and Ariosto, the very figures to whom Cesarotti was looking in his efforts to revitalise Italian literature. Fénelon is also a significant inclusion, as his novel *Les aventures de Télémaque* (1699) had been seen a French precursor of *Ossian*. Thomas Blackwell, in his *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), noted that, although not immune from criticism, Fénelon's *Télémaque* was a key modern successor to Homer.³⁸ Macpherson had almost certainly come into contact with Blackwell while he was a student at Aberdeen, and he had, according to Mitchell, 'applied a key tenet of [Blackwell's] teaching on Homer to Ossian: that ancient verse provides significant insight into the historical and sociological circumstances of its creation (and is not the exclusive preserve of individual artistic genius).'³⁹

Conclusion: The Celtic Revival

³⁷ Barry, *Works*, vol. II.371

³⁸ Thomas Blackwell, *Enquiry into the Life and Times of Homer* (London, 1736), p.60-1.

³⁹ Mitchell, *Visions of Britain*, p.130.

My focus in this essay has been the figurative and landscape tradition in art as it relates to James Macpherson's translations of Ossian. By way of conclusion, I would like to draw attention, albeit briefly, to another area of mislaid and rediscovered art which also owes much to Ossian; that is to say, the revival of the style of Celtic decorative art. We normally think of the Celtic Revival in art as a phenomenon of the 1890s, but its origins as a modern artistic movement can be seen more than a century earlier in the work of antiquarian artists such as Thomas Cordiner and Moses Griffith. However, neither Cordiner nor Griffith recorded Celtic work with sufficient accuracy to provide a proper foundation for revival. By contrast, one of the first examples of such accuracy can be found in the facsimiles of Celtic initial letters that comprise the frontispiece to the Highland Society of Scotland report on Ossian, which dates from 1805.

Those images establish the necessary conditions for the Celtic Revival of art later in the century, and that revival art, can be dated to book covers from the 1850s at the latest, such as the first edition of Daniel Wilson's *Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* published in 1851. In this text, Wilson also makes the case for Celtic art as a separate category, a point made again by J. O. Westwood in his essay accompanying the pages on *Celtic Ornament* in Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament* in 1856. The usage is further established by John Francis Campbell in volume four of his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* in 1862.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ For more on these issues see Murdo Macdonald, 'The Visual Dimension of *Carmina Gadelica*', in D. U. Stiubhart (ed.), *The Life and Legacy of Alexander Carmichael* (Port of Ness: The Islands Book Trust, 2008), p.135–45; Murdo Macdonald, 'The Visual Preconditions of Celtic Revival Art in Scotland', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* 13 (2008–2009), p.16–21

This provides a further indication of the significance of Ossian, when considered from a visual perspective. As I have discussed in this paper, James Macpherson's translations of Ossian, and to a lesser extent those of John Smith, inspired some of the most significant visual art made in Europe in the early nineteenth century. At the same time the interest these images generated led to detailed analysis of Celtic designs that were to inspire the work of Celtic Revival artists of the 1890s and later. The full influence of Macpherson's work on the visual art of both Britain and continental Europe remains to be articulated – whether from the perspective of landscape, figure composition or decorative design.

Caption information for Figures:

1. J. M. W. Turner, 1802, *Ben Lomond Mountains, Scotland: The Traveller – Vide Ossian's 'War of Caros'*, oil on canvas, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Former title *Welsh Mountain Landscape*.
2. J. M. W. Turner, 1832, *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.
3. Luigi Zandomenighi, 1817, *Ossian invita al canto la mesta Malvina* from *I Canti di Ossian pensieri d'un Anonimo, disegnati, et incise a Contorno*. Venezia: Guiseppe Battaglia. Engraved by Felice Zuliani.
4. Unidentified engraver, 1813. *Ossian*. Frontispiece to Michele Leoni, *Nuovi canti di ossian pubblicati in inglese da Giovanni Smith e recati in Italiano da Michele Leoni*, Firenze: Vittorio Alauzet. Engraving after an image of Ossian attributed to Alexander Runciman,
5. John Beugo, 1806, *Ossian*. Engraving after an image of Ossian attributed to Alexander Runciman. Frontispiece to John Sinclair, *Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian*, London: William Bulmer, 1806.
6. Beugo's engraving of the image attributed to Runciman re-engraved by Babet Lefevre as frontispiece for Pierre Le Tourneur et. al. (trans.), *Ossian, Fils de Fingal*. Paris: Dentu, 1810.
7. C. Catteneo, 1828, engraving after image of Ossian based on image attributed to Alexander Runciman, frontispiece for *Poesie di Ossian*, Milano: Presso Gaetano Schiepati.
8. Gavin Hamilton, c. 1763, *Detail of Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus*, oil on canvas, Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland.

