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SCRIPTING NATIVE GENIUS:
MEDIEVAL POETRY
AND THE MAKING OF BRITISH IDENTITY, 1760-1785

By

ELLEN PALMER, M.A.

A Thesis

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AUTHOR: Ellen Palmer, B.A. (Bishop's University),
M.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Sylvia Bowerbank

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ABSTRACT

The past two decades have seen a growing interest in the formation of British identity in the eighteenth-century. Benedict Anderson drew attention to the arbitrary nature of national identity in his influential *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), and historians such as Linda Colley, Gerald Newman, and Murray Pittock, among others, have since examined some of the salient issues aiding and resisting the emergence of a coherent sense of Britishness in the eighteenth-century. Literary historians, such as Howard Weinbrot and Katie Trumpener, have begun to explore the role poetry and novels have played in such conceptions of nation. In this study, I build on these initiatives by probing how literary antiquarianism contributed to Britain's emerging nationalism. More specifically, I investigate the tenor, complexion, and scope of the reinventions of the "Gothic" past in selected medieval poetical collections of the latter part of the century. By bringing into relief the national issues at play in collections by James Macpherson, Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton, Evar. Evans, and Thomas Chatterton, I illustrate how what seem to be mere debates over literary criticism are indeed pivotal struggles

over the way Britishness was being produced. Macpherson's celebration of Celtic liberty in his Ossian poems undermines England's Saxon ancestry; Evan Evans' insistence on the distinct society of the Britons in Wales resists English attempts to absorb Wales' poetic tradition; Percy and Warton construct an assimilative model of the progress of genius that seeks to elide boundaries of difference within Britain; and Chatterton's Rowley poems contrast Bristol's resilient Saxon past with London's Norman influences.

Germane to my study is an inquiry into the notion of "Gothic" liberty that was fuelling British nationalism in the first part of the eighteenth century. Built on the idea that the Saxons brought a spirit of liberty with them to England which expedited the rise of Protestantism and the success of the Parliamentary system, "Gothic" liberty was espoused by those with English sympathies. Although works such as James Thomson's "Rule, Britannia" (1740) sought to incorporate all of Britain into this "Gothic" vision, those with allegiances to Celtic identities – the Britons in Wales and the Highland Gaels in particular – were resistant to such a homogenizing notion. The production of medieval poetical collections, beginning with Macpherson's controversial *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), drew attention to the ancient divisions haunting Britain's past. As these poetical collections reframed, rehabilitated, and reimagined Britain's

medieval past, they manipulated the fraught issues of identity that could either invigorate or threaten to puncture the carefully-cultivated image of the British nation. My study directly compares how these projects promoted competing versions of Britishness, and traces how debates over their “authenticity” ultimately shaped a national approach to literary criticism .

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Introduction:

Producing Britain's Past

When Horace Walpole devised his "Gothic" mansion, Strawberry Hill, in the 1750s, his methods were shamelessly capricious. He used wallpaper to create the illusion of Gothic fretwork on his staircase, he invented reliques from the Crusades for his newly-discovered ancestor Sir Terry Robsart, and he used drawings from medieval tombs and cathedrals to design his fireplace and floor motifs. Walpole's estate, referred to by some critics as "a most trumpery piece of ginger-bread Gothic" with "pie-crust embattlements" and "pinnacles of lath and plaster," nonetheless became a model for Gothic architecture that was emulated by Britons and Europeans alike.¹ Similarly, his Gothic novel had little correspondence with the medieval period it claimed to represent. *The Castle of Otranto*, which Walpole initially maintained was an authentic translation of an Italian medieval manuscript, achieved immense popularity upon its publication in 1764. Its incredible plot-line, supernatural elements, and haunted settings were, Walpole explained when he confessed authorship in the second edition,

¹ For a more complete summary of such reactions, see Dianne Ames' "Strawberry Hill: Architecture of the 'As If.'"

“an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern” (21). Again, as with his mansion, Walpole displayed little concern over creating an “authentic” representation of medieval artifacts. “One may revive what has perished,” Walpole once remarked, “but it will perish again, if more life is not breathed into it than it enjoyed originally” (qtd. in Joan Evans, 139). His “Gothic” creations, then, were a self-consciously constructed blend of the excesses associated with the past, and the cultivated “taste” of eighteenth-century neo-classicism; they were what Walpole referred to as “venerable barbarism.”

Other eighteenth-century appropriations of the Gothic, while similarly selective and manipulative in their renditions of the past, were more concerned with at least conveying authenticity. The various medieval histories that were published in such great numbers during this period, for example, each claimed to represent the “authentic” version of Britain’s development as a nation. However, whether it be Walpole’s playful dalliances in Gothic excess, or John Pinkerton’s more serious attempt to attach historical events and racial characteristics to Gothic peoples in his *Dissertation on the Origin of the Scythians and the Goths* (1787), the plasticity of the Gothic as an aesthetic, social, or historical category of understanding in the eighteenth century was its most

distinguishing characteristic. This plasticity, of course, is not a phenomenon exclusive to this era. The medieval period has been perennially mined for its cultural capital, from endeavours as diverse as the sixteenth-century drive to find religious precedence for the Reformation, to the twentieth-century enthusiasm for the ideal of chivalry performed in anachronistic societies. In the eighteenth-century, the reworkings of Britain's medieval past are marked by the distinctive concerns of the period. One of the hallmarks of the eighteenth century, discussed recently by Linda Colley, Gerald Newman, and Murray Pittock, among others, is a preoccupation with national identity.² Eighteenth-century literary antiquarianism was intimately connected with Britain's emerging nationalism. In this study, I will be probing the tenor, complexion, and scope of the reinventions of the Gothic past in selected medieval poetical collections of the latter part of the century. As these collections reframe, rehabilitate, and reimagine Britain's medieval past, they influence contemporary understandings of the fraught issues of identity that both invigorate and threaten to puncture the eighteenth-century's carefully-cultivated image of the British nation.

² Gerald Newman has referred to this era's fascination with "national self-study"; Linda Colley has labelled "the invention of Britishness" a central concern of the period; and Murray G.H. Pittock has referred to the eighteenth century as "the historic battleground of the formation of Great Britain." See Newman's *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830* (1997); Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (1992), and Pittock's *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789* (1997).

The dominant image of the nation, illustrated most clearly in James Thomson's "Rule, Britannia" (1740), was one that accommodated the evolution and expansion of Britain in an assimilative model. The Act of Union with Scotland in 1707 had precipitated a period of internal struggle for coherent identity in Britain, while the nation's continued growth as an imperial power necessitated that it distinguish itself from other countries on the international scene. To attain any kind of coherence for a sense of Britishness, society turned to the unifying narratives of Britain's development provided by historians, antiquarians, and literary critics. National histories were published in unprecedented numbers, descriptions of examples of British antiquity were in high demand, and projects such as Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) provided a genealogy of Englishness. These national narratives produced lynchpins of identity: Britain's ongoing struggle for liberty against foreign powers, the splendour of Stonehenge, and the triumph of the English language.

However, while the first part of the century saw such projects filling Britain's need for a recognizable historical tradition, in the 1760s the success and influence of various collections of poetical specimens from the past instigated heated debates concerning the parameters and origins of Britishness. Crucial categories of identity such as language, temperament, politics, religion, and

regional characteristics were debated in a literary forum which, while substituting for the scarcity of historical documents, also offered an opportunity for unlimited embellishments, refashionings, and readjustments. The most influential of such medieval poetical collections were published and rigorously debated from the success of James Macpherson's Ossian poems in the early 1760s, to the diminuendo of the controversy over Chatterton's Rowley poems in the mid 1780s. This period was pivotal to Britain's development. Punctuated by the Seven Years War (1756-63), in which conquests in North America and India marked Britain's emergence as the world's leading colonial power, and the American Revolution, ending with Britain's acknowledgment of American independence in 1783, this volatile period was characterized by intense debates regarding the tyranny of foreign powers, the British love of liberty, and the responsibilities of the colonial endeavour. The assemblage of literary artefacts into collections that testified to the humanity, virtues, and genius of Britain's ancient inhabitants allowed the debate over such concerns to take place in an inexhaustably tractable past. Varying degrees of poetic licence were implemented to celebrate particular eras and peoples in Britain's previously neglected past.

Until the emergence of James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* in 1760, most eighteenth-century efforts to depict Britain's past stressed the commonalities of those born on British soil. The Act of Union in 1707 meant that a sense of Britishness needed to accommodate the histories of numerous ethnicities: the Highland Gaels; the Britons in Wales; and the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Normans that had settled the more central regions of the island. In projects such as Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), the development of the British nation was depicted as the gradual civilization and assimilation of its peoples into a coherent society. Literary conceptions of the past strove to efface differences among the nation's inhabitants. Dryden's opera *King Arthur* (1691), for example, saw Oswald proclaiming, "Britains and Saxons shall be one People; / One Common Tongue, one Common Faith shall bind / Our Jarring Bands, in a perpetual Peace" (5. 1.193), and fifty years later James Thompson's poem "Rule, Britannia," composed for the masque *King Alfred* (1740), does not even acknowledge the distinction between Saxons and Britons. In *King Alfred*, the Celtic myth of King Arthur is incorporated into an absorptive national framework, where Alfred, identified with the German-raised Prince Frederick, rises from distress to reestablish liberty in Britain.

These medieval groupings, however, were not so easily transcended or elided as such poems suggest; indeed, the Celtic-Saxon divide was a persistent category informing how different groups in Britain imagined themselves. The Celts considered themselves the original inhabitants of Britain. Settling in two waves, the first peopling Ireland and northern Scotland, and the second inhabiting the southern regions of Britain, the natives of Ireland, Northern Scotland and Wales each felt they represented the oldest and purest forms of the prestigious Celtic race. The Saxons, on the other hand, who took control of the bulk of the island after the Roman retreat from Britain, could not claim to represent an original sense of Britishness. Forcing the Celtic Britons south into Wales, and the northern Celts (or Gaels) up into the Highlands, they themselves fell victim to the Norman Conquest. Still, inhabitants in the central parts of Britain prided themselves on retaining a Germanic or Saxon spirit that was a formative influence on British identity. Of course, centuries of intermixture and colonization undermined any legitimate claim to distinct ethnicities, but for marginal groups such as the Welsh and the Scottish Highlanders, these categories persisted as potent differentiations between themselves and the inhabitants of the nation's centre, and the English in the nation's core looked to the Saxon past as a mine of cultural resources to assert English superiority.

The medieval poetical collections produced in the 1760s, and hotly debated into the early 1780s, drew attention to these ancient divisions haunting the British consciousness. While historians such as Linda Colley and Gerald Newman have argued for the common threads binding Britons together in a cogent sense of patriotism in the eighteenth century, my interest is to reveal the tensions and resistances against such homogenizing impulses. The very past that Samuel Johnson, Thomas Gray, and Thomas Warton were mining for their assimilative histories of the English language offered a similar opportunity for literary antiquarians to assert the differences the past represented. The conflicting desires of the diverse interest groups peopling Britain are articulated in particularly succinct ways in the literary antiquarianism of the 1760s, 1770s, and early 1780s, where narratives of historical and literary development could be linked to prototypes of national character. Using a potent mix of historical fact and conjecture, manuscript evidence and liberal editing practices, skewed retellings and conspicuous oversights, these collections reconstruct the medieval past using competing critical frameworks. Whether it be the poetic turn of the Highland Celtic spirit, or the love of liberty of the Saxons, these projects privilege different aspects of Britain's varied past, and reframe them to accommodate eighteenth-century nationalistic concerns.

The collections I will be examining in detail are James Macpherson's *Ossian* (1760-1762), Evan Evans's *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards* (1764), Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765), Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-81) and the various incarnations of Thomas Chatterton's Rowley manuscripts that were circulated or published from 1768 onwards. Because these collections draw from the cultural resources of different ethnic identities and focus on different periods in history to depict the core of a national ethos, each of their reworkings of the past is armed with its own set of historical weapons. In *Ossian*, for example, the cultural capital of Celtic culture provides a prestigious scaffolding for the glorification of the uniqueness of Highland culture. Evan Evans draws instead on the treasure of medieval Welsh manuscripts that stand as testaments to the ancient civility of Celtic Wales. Thomas Warton also praises the Celts who settled Wales; however, his vision of history incorporates their legacy into an English framework. For Thomas Percy and Thomas Chatterton, the Saxon past of Northumberland and Bristol, respectively, is celebrated, with each placing different premiums on literacy, civic liberty, and native genius. Each of these collections, then, speaks to the regional characteristics that are celebrated by the various ethnic identities struggling for representation, and even ascendancy, in the new British nation.

There were numerous other collections of medieval poetry that emerged in the latter part of the eighteenth century. John Clark's *The Works of the Caledonian Bards* (1778), Edward Jones' *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (1784), and George Richards' *Songs of the Aboriginal Bards of Britain* (1792), to name a few, were all works that sought to capitalize on the popularity of medieval poetry. However, these works all followed in the wake of the collections I will be discussing and did not gain nearly the popularity of these seminal pieces of literary antiquarianism. For it was in the immediate success, notoriety, and controversy greeting the collections created by Macpherson, Evans, Percy, and Chatterton that the terms of eighteenth-century literary nationalism were mapped out. The defining characteristics of British nationality that I mentioned earlier-- Britain's perpetual struggle for liberty against foreign powers, the pride in its ancient past, and the exaltation of its linguistic history -- are taken up in these collections and given clearly-defined ethnic roots. Macpherson, Evans, Percy and Chatterton claim the glory of Britain's past for specific regions: the Scottish Highlands, Wales, Northumberland, and Bristol, respectively. These claims resurface in later collections by Edward Jones and others, but it is in these earlier publications where the parameters of the debate over Britain's literary past are introduced.

Moreover, what gives these first four collections such potency and cogency is that, while the practice of using British literary reliques to define national identity was an innovative one, the underlying concept these collections were developing was not. The negotiable value of the "Gothic" as a cultural marker in the eighteenth century is central to each of these collections, and it is this aspect of the projects that I will be bringing to the fore in my study. By promoting or undermining the homogenizing concept of Gothic liberty that informed political debate and national identity in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, these poetical collections articulate new, or to be more accurate, reinvigorate older, forms of British identity. From the Celtic "liberty" touted in Macpherson's *Ossian*, to the political independence of medieval Bristol in the Chatterton manuscripts, these poetical collections deploy the cultural capital of the "Gothic" to promote unique versions of British nationalism that, while ethnically specific, enlist malleable but nonetheless recognizable "Gothic" elements for their frameworks. The successes and failures of these collections, then, are intimately linked to the ways in which they struggle to define and lay claim to the loaded concept of "Gothic" liberty.

Gothic Liberty and Its Manifestations

The notion of “Gothic” liberty, as with other appropriations of the Gothic, is marked by its plasticity. “Gothic” liberty began to circulate as a marker of identity in Britain during the antiquarian researches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the Reformation, antiquarian research was taken up with unprecedented alacrity in efforts to demonstrate that a purer form of the English church had existed prior to the Roman and Norman invasions of England. These researches put forward the theory that the Church of England had been established independent of Roman influence, and had an apostolic foundation which allowed Anglicans to boast of their institution’s personal link to Christ.³ Previously, the medieval period had been viewed with distaste, and deemed an era unworthy of study; however, by pointing to an early medieval period as the blueprint of a native religious institution, unfettered by Norman and Roman tyranny, antiquarian findings could be used to justify Henry VIII’s break with the Roman Catholic Church. While the later medieval period was linked to religious superstition and popery in the minds of many, the earlier medieval period now conjured up the idea of a pre-Conquest church that espoused freedoms linked to a native religious tradition.

³ See Colin Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600-1800*, 1999, Chapter 5.

Although this emphasis on the positive virtues of the earlier medieval period was rooted in theories of the ancient Britons, who were supposedly tied to the Tudor dynasty through Henry VII, the seventeenth century saw a growing interest in a specifically Saxon culture. The publication of Richard Verstegen's *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* (1605), which developed the notion that ancient "Scanzda," or Scandinavia, was the womb of all Gothic nations, ignited a passion for things Germanic. Gothic tribes were styled as fierce lovers of liberty, who had established a system of mixed government that balanced power democratically. Interpretations of Britain's Gothic past fuelled the seventeenth-century debate between Parliamentarians and the Stuart monarchy. Antiquarian research flourished in the seventeenth century because Parliamentarians were able to trace, however faultily, a tradition of the institution of public assemblies back to their early medieval ancestors. Just as the study of medievalism was sanctioned during the Reformation as a means of "discovering" a British religious heritage unfettered by the control of the Roman church, antiquarian research in the seventeenth century took on importance as the gateway to the liberty of medieval political institutions.

The English Gothic tradition was distinguished from other northern nations because England alone was believed to have preserved the notions of

liberty embedded in the ancient constitution. "No nation," John Oldmixon wrote in 1724, "has preserv'd their Gothic Constitution better than the English" (25).

This was a source of pride for the English, particularly because it allowed them to accentuate their "liberties" in relation to the former "master" of Europe, Rome.

Lord Bolingbroke proudly explains in his *Remarks on the History of England* (1730):

It must be a pleasure to reflect on that uniformity of spirit which created and has constantly preserved or retrieved the original freedom of the British and Saxon constitutions.

I feel a secret pride . . . when I consider that the Romans, those masters of the world, maintained their liberty more than seven centuries; and that Britain, which was a free nation, above seventeen hundred years ago, is so at this hour. (316-17)

For Bolingbroke, the island of Britain "hath been a temple, as it were, of liberty.

Whilst her sacred fires have been extinguished in so many countries, here they

have been religiously kept alive" (93). And so, while Samuel Kliger has

explained that "The term 'Gothic' was serviceable to include all non-Roman

people," the notion of Gothic liberty was revered as a particularly English, or

British, characteristic (84-85).

These rehabilitations of different versions of a "Gothic" past were facilitated by the vagueness of the term itself. The "Gothic" was often used as a pejorative term denoting the kind of barbarity, destruction, and ignorance linked with the Goths' sacking of Rome. "Gothic" taste was a negative characteristic referring to transgression and excess. Out of this common usage, the term "Gothic" became interchangeable with the "medieval," a period during which the classical virtues of Rome were extinguished and replaced by the superstition and gloom of the Middle Ages. In the antiquarian researches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, when the term "Goth" became conflated with the terms "Geat" and "Jute," and historians espoused the belief that all Gothic tribes originated in the North and were related, a more positive definition of the "Gothic" emerged. A set of assumptions built around the virility, strength and ferocity of peoples originating from northern climes was adopted by many seventeenth-century antiquarians. The barbarians who took down the Roman Empire were seen by some as representative of a northern spirit, one that Paul the Deacon, among others, had earlier identified as Germanic virility, vigor and zeal for liberty. The rise of Protestantism distinguished northern nations from their southern counterparts. When it came to specific political liberties, however, "Gothic" liberty was deemed the sole preserve of Britain. The "Ancient

Constitution," believed to have been preserved in England alone, meant that the British nation, as we see it depicted in James Thompson's "Liberty," was the last refuge of the liberties once enjoyed in classical Rome. Thus, the term "Gothic" was available to be taken up in various causes in the eighteenth century: as a descriptor of transgression and excess, as a vague historical period, or as a cultural group embodying virtues of liberty and "manly" vigor that could extend to all northern countries, or might only refer to Britain.

Eighteenth-century literary critics and historians have tended not to acknowledge the connections between these early eighteenth-century understandings of Britain's "Gothic" past and the medieval poetical collections that emerge later in the century, perhaps because in the mid-eighteenth century there seems to be a deliberate movement away from the historicity of the term. During the years of the Walpole administration, debates over the preservation of the Ancient Constitution were subsumed into discussions regarding the preservation of the *spirit* of Gothic liberty. Poets played a significant role in bringing different interpretations of Gothic liberty into the political arena. "The Court Whigs under Walpole, desirous of presenting themselves as the defenders of liberties their party had secured," Philip Ayres has argued, "liked to picture the English as slaves until 1688, and accordingly downplayed England's

‘ancient’, ‘Gothic’ constitution and ‘Gothic liberties’” (5). In this sense, the Court Whigs adopted what had traditionally been a Tory position, a position that celebrated the royalist victory of the Glorious Revolution. Tories and Whigs dissatisfied with Walpole’s politics, however, assumed the traditional Whig stance. “Patriot poets,” Christine Gerrard explains, “turned their attention to the widespread notion of a Gothic ‘cousinage’ of early peoples who inhabited Britain” to promote a notion of liberty opposed to the practices of the Walpole administration (104-5). The shifting positions of this impassioned political period once again repackaged the “Gothic” to suit different needs.

The end of Walpole’s reign in 1742, however, initiated a period of poetry notorious for its lack of political engagement. A trend which John Sitter has described as a “flight from history” developed out of poets’ disgust with London’s corrupt political scene.⁴ However, a “Gothic” aesthetic continued to permeate poetry. This aesthetic is most noticeable in poems such as Edward Young’s “Night-Thoughts” (1742), William Collins’ “Ode to Fear” (1747), and Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), which draw upon associations of the “Gothic” with gloom in order to explore the possibilities of unfettered imaginative reverie. The tendency to implement a “Gothic”

⁴ See John Sitter’s *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.

aesthetic to probe the unknown reaches of imagination and human emotion stimulated a "Gothic" style of writing that drew upon the primitive, emotive qualities associated with a pre-Enlightenment British society and capitalized on the continued fascination with popery and tyranny that marked the "Gothic" past's darker side. This trend, however, is not as de-politicized as Dowling would like to suggest. The "flight from history" that the "Gothic" undergoes in its transformation into an aesthetic category allows the term to circulate more freely as cultural capital. By using the term to denote imaginative licence, artists could efface the ethnic specificity of the term and redeploy the "Gothic" as artistic fodder without having to acknowledge its historic associations.

Horace Walpole's "Gothic" best typifies this form of appropriation. He is unapologetic about his adulteration of Gothic architecture and literature, saying of his Gothic estate, "In truth, I did not mean to make my house so Gothic as to exclude convenience, and modern refinements in luxury. The designs of the inside and outside are strictly ancient, but the decorations are modern" (*A Description of Strawberry Hill*, iii). His appropriation of Gothic and modern elements under his own rubric imbues the "Gothic" with a homogenizing tendency. Much as with seventeenth-century understandings of the "Gothic" which could expand to include all northern tribes, or contract to denote England

only, Walpole's Gothic is an arbitrary category to which he can add or remove elements with relative autonomy. His loyalty to historical accuracy is minimal. Indeed, he exhibits marked distaste for any reminders of the actual past he has aestheticized. After perusing John Pinkerton's *Essay on the Ancient History of Scotland*, for example, he remarks:

. . . I am ashamed of not being able to tell you that I have finished reading your *Essay on the Ancient History of Scotland*. I am so totally unversed in the story of original nations, and I own I always find myself so little interested in savage manners, unassisted by individual characters, that though *you* lead me with a firmer hand than any historian through the dark tracts, the clouds rose round me the moment I have passed them, and I retain no memory of the ground I have trod . . . I confess I do not care a straw for your subjects . . . all the barbarous names at the end of the first volume and the gibberish in the Appendix was to me as unintelligible as abracadabra, and made no impression on me but to raise respect of your patience, and admire a sagacity that could extract meaning and *suite* from what seemed to me the most

indigestible of materials. You rise in my estimation in proportion
to the disagreeable mass of your ingredients . . . (4)

Walpole's description of his distaste for historical accounts of "barbarous" times, entertaining as it is, is also disturbing, particularly when one takes into account that Walpole was one of the cultural gatekeepers for uses of the "Gothic." He was outspoken in his arguments against the authenticity of the Macpherson and Chatterton collections, despite falsely claiming that his entirely fictional novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, was an authentic translation of a medieval manuscript. Walpole equated an antiquarian with a "word catcher" or a "monkish historian," and admitted freely, "I am no historian" (*Memoirs of George II*, 2:30). Nevertheless, Walpole provided an architectural and literary model for the "Gothic" revival at mid-century.

Even Thomas Gray, whose 1757 poems "Triumphs of Owen," "Death of Hoel," "Caradoc," "Conan," and most notably, "The Bard" were inspired by actual historical events and manuscripts, exploits the past for its imaginative material. As Katie Trumpener has pointed out, Gray's form of cultural appropriation "endangered the bardic tradition" by trying "to impersonate the bardic voice and to imitate bardic materials, without grasping their historical and cultural significance" (6). His depiction of early Britain was decidedly lacking in

concrete historical conciseness, and depended instead upon poetic licence. For Gray, the histories of different cultures provided him with an infusion of imaginative materials. He could, Walpole suggested, equally be a “Welsh Gray” as much as a “Danish Gray.” In Gray’s hands, the “Gothic” continued to evolve as an aesthetic category detached from any cultural rootedness; it was a mode that encouraged the notion of individual “genius” that grew in popularity throughout the end of the eighteenth-century. As with Walpole, Gray’s Gothic implied a version of liberty that related to imagination rather than a specific political history. That is not to say, however, that it did not have its own set of political implications. By emphasizing the role of imagination, Gray’s “Gothic” aesthetic allowed him, as it did Walpole, to appropriate cultural property at whim and, rather than dehistoricize it, make it part of the English tradition. Again, the “Gothic” is used to homogenize, or—more correctly— to anglicize, culturally-specific materials.

Mapping British Genius

In contrast to the cultural uprootedness of Walpole or Gray’s “Gothic” aesthetic, the medieval poetical collections that were produced upon the success of James Macpherson’s *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* reclaim the cultural specificity of medieval artefacts. Of course, projects like Macpherson’s and Chatterton’s

involved their own recastings of the “Gothic” past, and Percy’s *Reliques* is far from being an accurate rendition of its manuscript sources; however, these collections throw into question the supposedly apolitical forms of “genius” celebrated by Walpole and Gray, forms which assume an English cultural superiority, and instead trace the roots of British genius to specific ethnic sources by producing medieval literary relics.

What allows these collections to carry any weight is the revived interest in medieval poetry prompted by a mid-century desire to outline a British national literary tradition. The works of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton were being promoted to the status of classical authors. In 1756, Joseph Warton urged readers to be more responsive to British literature. In *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope*, he writes:

We have been too long attached to Grecian and Roman stories. In truth, the DOMESTICA FACTA are more interesting, as well as more useful: more interesting, because we all think ourselves concerned in the actions and fates of our countrymen; more useful, because the characters and manners bid the fairest be true and natural, when they are drawn from models with which we are exactly acquainted. . . . The historical plays of Shakespeare, are

always particularly grateful to the spectator, who loves to see our own Harrys and Edwards, better than all the Achilles and Caesars, that ever existed" (I: 272-273).

This renewed interest in British authors was accompanied by a burst of antiquarian energy, this time directed towards retrieving literary remnants of the past. Joseph's brother, Thomas Warton, in his *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (1754), raised the status of medieval literature by valuing it as a context for Elizabethan literature. Antiquarians, then, began to retrieve the scattered pieces of Britain's literary past. Ian Haywood has pointed out that with this movement poetic manuscripts from Saxon and Celtic sources began to assume the status of historical documents. Manuscripts were being rescued from neglect and deterioration, and the cachet of the found manuscript grew to mystical proportions. Each newly-discovered manuscript was a boon, a lost treasure. James Macpherson describes finding valuable manuscripts that were being used as tailor's measures, Thomas Percy latched upon his prized folio manuscript in a friend's parlour where it was being used to light fires, and Thomas Chatterton linked his Rowley manuscripts to a chest above St. Mary Redcliffe Church that was filled with abandoned papers. In contrast to Walpole's highly-constructed Gothic fabrications, the translations of such

manuscript documents claimed to represent a direct link to the previously obscure medieval past.

As historical documents, then, these antiquarian findings were central in determining and defining Britain's racial origins. *Ossian*, for example, was used in Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788) to comment on the ancient Caledonians. Chatterton's Rowley manuscripts provided materials for William Barrett's *History and Antiquities of the City of Bristol*. "[A] great deal of pride rested on their conclusions," Nick Groom writes of these speculations and researches. They asked,

which northern races had carried letters, and by implication poetry, from the fabulous heats of the East to the moody epic wastes of the North? There was nothing less at stake than a proof of cultural supremacy. (72)

Macpherson's *Ossian*, for example, an epic from a third-century bard, staked the claim that it was in the Scottish Highlands where the true spirit of imaginative poetry lay, and that this love of poetry had been carried to Britain with the Celtic races.

Enmeshed in the drive to prove cultural supremacy was a scramble to lay claim to the cultural capital of "liberty" that was believed to characterize

northern races. The term “Gothic,” with its associations with religious, political, and aesthetic liberties, became one of the focal points around which the debates over cultural supremacy turned. In her book *Bardic Nationalism*, Katie Trumpener has theorized the struggle over the rights to bardic materials as one which sets the peripheries and England against each other; however, these negotiations of the past involve more subtle stratagems and more varied players than this dichotomy would suggest. The Welsh claim to the “Gothic” liberty appropriated by an English-based elite is much different than the Scottish one. Even within England, as my examinations of Chatterton and Percy’s projects will show, there were struggles over defining core ethnic identities. Not only do the collections I will be discussing force historians and critics to acknowledge the cultural rootedness of medieval literature, but at the same time they also develop discrete lynchpins of identity for the various ethnic groups peopling Britain.

Although my concern in this study is with how the concept of “Gothic” liberty is defined in various medieval poetical collections in the 1760s, much of my interest lies not with the poems themselves, but rather with the critical framings provided by their collectors, and the ensuing dissertations debating their authenticity or merit. Because these poems, with the exception of Chatterton’s manuscripts, were based on written or oral evidence, the pieces in

themselves often do not articulate the concerns of eighteenth-century antiquarians. It is in the critical essays, such as Evans' "Dissertatio De Bardis," or Percy's "An Essay on the Ancient English Minstrelsy," that terms such as "native genius" and "liberty" are negotiated. My first three chapters, then, concentrate more on the critical apparatus and appraisals of the poetical collections than on the poems themselves. In my discussion of Chatterton, however, I engage in more in-depth analysis of the "medieval" pieces, for it is in the Rowley poems that Chatterton's eighteenth-century conceptions of a Saxon identity are best discerned. That does not mean that the poems in the other collections are insignificant; that would be far from the truth. Macpherson's publications inspired many Ossianic imitations, including several by Chatterton; Evans's manuscript translations inspired the bulk of Gray's Welsh poetry; and Thomas Percy's ballads, of course, prompted an entire revival. My concern, however, is not with how the recuperation of examples of medieval poetry influenced aesthetic trends; instead, I am concerned with exploring how the manner in which these collections were presented to the public influenced how British national identities were being developed through various literary traditions.

The publication of the Ossian poems, first as scattered poems, and then as full-blown epics, made aggressive claims for the superiority of Celtic tradition

over the Gothic. In effect, Macpherson's publications brought the notion of Gothic liberty into crisis. Thus, my study will begin by examining the publication of James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* in 1760, and the subsequent epics *Fingal* (1761) and *Temora* (1763). *Fragments* met with spirited interest from Thomas Gray, the English poet who claimed to have "gone wild" over the first publication, although he began to voice doubts about the authenticity of the poems upon the publication of the epics. Ferdinando Warner, an English scholar from Cambridge who refused to assent to the historical reality of the poems, believed they were authentic poems, but argued that they were of Irish origin. In my chapter on Macpherson, I will be exploring how his Ossian publications disrupt common conceptions of the Gothic past as one which contributes to an English-based version of British nationality. The heated debates over the authenticity of the Ossian publications prompted contentious discussions around manuscript evidence, "national" characteristics, and the ideology of Highland landscape. These charges of forgery continue to skew our perception of *Ossian* today. The passionate tenor of these discussions, I will argue, was fuelled by the threat Macpherson's project posed to the predominantly English understandings of Gothic liberty. By claiming religious and political liberties as the domain of a Celtic tradition, the Ossian publications

force English antiquarians and writers to refine their vague notions of Gothic liberty and to trace them to Saxon roots. Using a rigorously-framed historical context, *Ossian* throws into relief the inadequacy of the English version of the Gothic past, and its inability to accommodate the newly-emerging sense of the British nation, a nation built in significant part upon the backs of Scottish Highlanders. The terms under negotiation in the *Ossian* controversy – not only “Gothic,” but “savage,” “barbarian,” “Celtic,” and “civility” – are the axles upon which the debate turns, and in effect circumscribe the way in which subsequent medieval publications are considered.

Evan Evans’s *Some Specimens of Ancient Welsh Poetry* (1764) was the first significant answer to Macpherson’s challenge. As I will discuss in my second chapter, English antiquarians sought a response to *Ossian* in the Welsh literary tradition, where the relative wealth of ancient manuscripts promised to offer an authoritative alternative to *Ossian*’s mostly oral tradition. Unfortunately for the English, just as the Welsh past provided an opportunity to thwart the Highland claim to ancientness, it also presented an opening for Evans to revisit the history of the colonization of Wales by the Saxons. Evans’ *Some Specimens*, while arguing for the superiority of the Welsh over other Celtic settlements in the British Isles, also differentiates between the barbarity of the Saxons and the civility of the

Welsh. His collection of poems celebrates the Britons and their love of liberty, while aligning the English and Edward I with ignorance, tyranny, and savagery. My central concern in this second chapter, then, is to highlight the careful strategies used by both the English and the Welsh to capitalize upon the wealth of ancient manuscripts in Wales. The collection which emerged out of these negotiations, Evans' *Some Specimens*, was ultimately unable to attract much attention in England. By detailing the reasons behind the relative failure of the collection, I will be exploring what renditions of the past English and British readers were interested in entertaining.

Thomas Percy was more successful at conveying both "authenticity" and an appealing poetic tradition. Using his liberally-edited collection of medieval ballads, in *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765) Percy traces an English-based poetic tradition from its imaginative but rude beginnings, to its dynamic combination of energetic fancy and venerable classicism in the poetry of Spenser and Shakespeare. Building on a renewed interest in medieval ballads already sanctioned by such literary institutions as *The Spectator*, Percy was able to provide British, rather than classical, contexts within which to appreciate the hallmarks of the English literary tradition. My third chapter explores the ways in which Percy, with the help of Samuel Johnson in particular, defines English

literary genius through such loaded concepts as “imagination” and “romantic wildness.” I will compare his efforts to those of Thomas Warton, whose narrative of British literary progress in his *History of English Poetry* (1774-1781) is styled in similar fashion. Warton’s project, however, locates the origins of British genius in the south-west corner of England, while Percy celebrates a “northern spirit” thriving in Northumberland. By teasing out the similarities and differences between these two projects, I will propose what an English-centred version of Gothic liberty might look like, as well as the factors influencing such a vision that might continue to promote schisms in such a potentially unifying notion. Ultimately, however, both projects trace an English literary tradition from barbarity to civility, and I am interested in illustrating how such a model opposes the methodology of Macpherson and Evans’s projects, which hearken back to a “Golden Age” of poetry.

The fourth chapter of this study will focus on Thomas Chatterton’s Rowley manuscripts. In this final section I am concerned with two issues. The first is the strategies Chatterton uses to create his Saxon version of liberty, a liberty that is firmly rooted in Bristol’s past. His glorification of the political, religious and individual spirit of liberty that permeates the history of his native city challenges the versions of national literary history set up by Percy and

Warton. Many of the responses to his project provide direct evidence for this. My second concern is with how Chatterton's project is treated differently than Macpherson's, despite the fact that these two collections of medieval poetry are most often grouped together as eighteenth-century "forgeries." The shift from focussing on the Rowley manuscripts, to celebrating Chatterton as the prototypical Romantic poet, enacts a further development in viewing the "Gothic," one which allows the "Gothic" imagination to be appropriated in a new way.

My study begins in 1760, then, with the appropriation of "Gothic" liberty in Macpherson's *Fragments*, traces the various re-negotiations of the term in the ensuing decade, and finally interrogates the shift in viewing the Rowley manuscripts as Gothic "forgeries," to celebrating Chatterton as a symbol of native "Gothic" genius in the mid 1780s. While attempts to lay claim to the notion of "Gothic" liberty were concentrated in the 1760s, the next fifteen years of literary activity saw the publication of Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, as well as numerous attempts to reconcile the Saxon spirit of Chatterton's poetical collection with an emerging critical practice that traced English literature from its rude beginnings, to its civilized and improved eighteenth-century status. This reconciliation is an essential phase in the shifting value of "Gothic" liberty

that was precipitated by *Ossian*, and is pivotal to my discussion of these medieval poetical collections. My study ends with the “settling” of the Rowley debate in the mid 1780s. Thomas Warton and Edmund Malone’s treatises arguing against the authenticity of the Rowley manuscripts were published in 1782, and in many ways brought the vocal outpour of the debate down to a steady murmur. By ending my study in the mid 1780s, I can trace the evolution of the “Gothic” from its historical manifestations in the 1760s, to its developing role as a “Romantic” characteristic in the 1780s. Interestingly, in its latter form, the two divergent strands of the Gothic aesthetic are harmonized: Walpole’s fantastical, imaginative Gothic sensibility; and the obsession with the past fuelled by literary antiquarianism.

Johnson’s death in 1784 is not insignificant, either, as an ending point for my study. On the one hand his death is of symbolic importance – it signals the end of an era, the so-called “Age of Johnson”; on the other hand, in a more concrete way, the loss of Johnson frees poetical collections from being subject to some of his more rigid demands. Johnson in his various capacities – as cultural watchdog, the arbiter of an emerging literary criticism, a formidable opponent in the *Ossian* controversy, a facilitator in Evans’s project, an active participant in the creation of *Reliques*, or a private investigator in the Rowley affair – is inescapably

influential in the formation of eighteenth-century literary values. His death allows a new freedom for the use of the medieval past in the developing Romantic movement, for which Chatterton came to be such an important figure. I have deliberately chosen, though, to keep Johnson in the background of this study. As a figure who haunts each chapter, he represents what, if anything, could be called the emerging "centre" of Britishness. Rather than reassert the dominant perspective from which many of us have been accustomed to viewing the "Age of Johnson," however, this study seeks to disturb and expand our perspective on this all-important period in Britain's national development. My goal is to provide a forum for the multiplicity of voices competing for acknowledgment in the "invention" of Britain, rather than to give what we might call the "winning" voice centre stage. What is of concern in this study is how and why different versions of British literary nationalism succeeded in determining the direction of literary style and criticism, while others did not.

Chapter 1:

The Ossian Project

In the summer of 1760, Thomas Gray wrote to his friend William Mason:

The Erse Fragments have been published five weeks ago in Scotland. . . I continue to think them genuine, tho' my reasons for believing the contrary are rather stronger than ever: but I will have them antique, for I never knew a Scotchman of my own time, that could read, much less write, poetry; & such poetry too!

(*Correspondence*, II:690)

Gray is referring here, of course, to James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, a Scottish publication that prompted widespread interest from English literary critics upon its emergence in 1760. Gray's concern over the authenticity of the poems is characteristic of the uneasy response *Fragments* received in England. The Ossian controversy, a literary debate that raged for decades, and still persists in discussions of the Ossian poems today, centred around Macpherson's claim that the poems he published in *Fragments*, and later in the two epics *Fingal* and *Temora*, were the products of the third-century Gaelic bard

Ossian. Gray's initial belief in the authenticity of the Ossian poems was not a position shared by most English critics, although there were those, such as Horace Walpole and Thomas Percy, whose opinions vacillated temporarily. Gray's wish, however, to believe that the poems were ancient rather than that they were written by a contemporary Scot was consistent with prevailing opinion in the nation's core that poetry was the contemporary domain of the English rather than the Scottish. The emergence of the Ossian poems challenged English dominance in the British world of letters.

Moreover, it was the particular way this challenge was mounted that created such turbulence among English literary critics. In recent years, scholars such as Richard B. Sher have urged that we must consider the Ossian controversy within the context of eighteenth-century anti-Scottish sentiment in England, and even Macpherson's contemporaries acknowledged the prejudice fuelling the authenticity debate.¹ Sher has attributed the heat of the debate to the threat Johnson and other members of London's literary elite were feeling from the growing numbers of Scotsmen succeeding politically in the nation's capital.

¹ See Richard B. Sher's essay "Percy, Shaw and the Ferguson 'Cheat': National Prejudice in the Ossian Wars" in Howard Gaskill's *Ossian Revisited*. Here, Sher argues that "The dispute over the authenticity cannot be understood in isolation from other circumstances in Hanoverian Britain. Quite apart from the issue of Ossian, English men of letters such as Johnson, Percy and Walpole felt threatened by the sudden ascent of their Scottish counterparts during the third quarter of the eighteenth century" (234).

Anti-Scottish sentiment was indeed at a high ebb at the time Macpherson's publications emerged. Since the Act of Union in 1707, Scots had been playing an increasingly significant role in English affairs. John Stuart, the Third Earl of Bute, became the first Scottish Prime Minister of Britain in 1763, much to the dismay of many English politicians. Charles Churchill and John Wilkes (who once described Macpherson as "a vile Scottish jade")² influenced popular English opinion of the Scots with their anti-Scot publication *The North Briton* in the early 1760s. They figured the Scots as a threat to English identity, and often used caricature to play on the supposed affair between Lord Bute and the Queen Mother; they celebrated England as the champion of liberty, critiquing Scotland for its arbitrary political principles; and protested the use of the term "Great Britain."³ Bute's involvement in *Ossian* as "The certain noble person" whose generosity was praised in *Fingal*, and as the patron and dedicatee of *Temora*, contributed to suspicions of a Scotch conspiracy at the root of the publications. There is more at stake, however, with the *Ossian* publications than fear of a Scottish "cabal." The *Ossian* project, an undertaking which, indeed, was spearheaded by a number of Scottish nationalists, threatened to puncture the

² This reference was found written in the British Library's copy of D. Erskine Baker's *The Muse of Ossian* (Edinburgh 1763). A note written in it by John Wilkes reads "The Muse of Ossian is a vile Scottish jade." Quoted in Stafford's *The Sublime Savage*, p. 160 fn.1.

image of Britishness that was issuing forth from the nation's core. The danger the poems and their accompanying critical dissertations posed was not one of infiltration into the centralized power of London, but rather was one of asserting the difference, and the corresponding preeminence, of Scottish culture over the English.

This assertion of difference was all the more menacing because it drew on traditions which the English had absorbed into their notions of a Britannia built on shared assumptions of "Gothic" liberty. As I discussed in my introductory chapter, in the eighteenth-century an English-based sense of Britishness saw the assimilation of Celtic and Saxon poetical and national characteristics under the vague and tractable rubric of the "Gothic." Referring to a notion of liberty that aligned itself with religious, political and imaginative freedoms, the "Gothic" was increasingly used to define an English-centred version of Britishness that saw the culmination of these various forms of liberty in the Anglican Church, the established powers of Parliament, and the standardization and glorification of the English language. Gray, complicit in this vision of Britishness, describes in his "The Progress of Poesy" the Nine Muses leaving Greece in its "evil hour," and then abandoning Rome and the "pomp of tyrant-Power," to land in

³ For a more in-depth discussion of Wilkes and Scottophobia, see the chapter on "Peripheries" in Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation*.

“Albion” and prompt the genius of Shakespeare (ll. 77, 79,82). It is ironic that in this celebration of English genius, Gray should refer to Britain as Albion, the Roman name for Scotland. For Gray, although Britain as a whole is the source of native poetic genius, it is in a specifically English tradition where the “Gothic” imagination, much like the “Gothic” constitution, is best preserved. In preparation for his proposed history of “English” poetry, for example, he researches early Gaelic poetry, as well as Scandinavian and Welsh verse. In his version of the “progress” of letters, however, the more recent hallmarks of literary greatness are conspicuously English: Shakespeare and Dryden. By aligning political and religious freedoms with the vigour of spirit necessary for good poetry, Gray – alongside Samuel Johnson, Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton, and others – uses the malleable notion of “Gothic” liberty to bolster the English claim to the fruits of Britain’s literary tradition: it is only in a nation where individual liberties are guarded by the parliamentary system and the Anglican church, they maintain, that literary genius can flourish alongside more civilized values.

This chapter will explore how the Ossian poems challenge this reading of Britain’s literary and national history. Fiona Stafford has pointed to the style of *Ossian* as a contributing factor to the notion of the Highlands as an area

associated with freedom. The free style in which the poems are written, she argues, signifies a liberation from more restrictive poetic forms. She claims, however, that “the appeal of *Ossian* was not merely stylistic . . . the free style of the verse seemed a reflection of the free society of Ancient Britain” (178). This association with liberty, I would argue, is much more concrete and particularized than this. Indeed, by emphasizing the historical, political and religious freedoms of Highland culture, Macpherson plants the “native oak” of liberty firmly in the Highlands, forcing the English notion of Gothic liberty into crisis. Employing similar notions of “Gothic” liberty to the English writers mentioned above, but deploying them within the Celtic tradition of the Highlands, the *Ossian* project distinguishes between the ethnic roots of the Celtic and Gothic traditions. English critics, then, were forced to redefine – or, more accurately, to re-imagine – how England’s “Gothic” tradition shaped Britain’s national character. Murray G. H. Pittock has claimed that “Macpherson’s image of Scotland was . . . a pleasingly remote image, unlikely to stir any patriotic spirit to action” (73). If, however, one explores the issues at stake in the *Ossian* debate – ethnic purity, language and civility, the history of the Highlands, and the link between regional character and landscape – it becomes clear that the image of Scotland portrayed in the *Ossian* poems and their accompanying dissertations is not “a pleasingly

remote image," but rather is a celebration of a specifically Scottish Celtic spirit that functions as both a cogent marker of group identity for Scottish Highlanders, and as a dangerous threat to the English version of "Gothic" liberty. In the Ossian poems, civility and liberty exist independent from any English notion of "The Progress of Poesy," and the Celtic spirit they celebrate is defined as distinct from that of Wales, despite that nation's Celtic roots. The dissertations affixed to the Ossian publications clearly disregard the Welsh by arguing that their original Celtic spirit has been adulterated by Roman and Saxon invasions. Just as the English idealized their nation's constant struggle against tyranny as an outgrowth of the "Gothic" legacy, so did the Ossian poems celebrate Highland resistance to foreign intervention as a testament to a pure "Celtic" spirit.

Throughout my analysis I will be highlighting the relationship between the issues of national identity that are being debated in the Ossian controversy, and the corresponding critical practice that develops out of these debates. If one examines the subsequent projects set in motion by the publication of the Ossian poems – Hugh Blair's *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (1763), Samuel Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), and the numerous medieval poetical collections that follow in its wake--it is

possible to recognize the crucial issues of national identity the poems contest. Couched in the critical commentary of the Ossian debate, and ingrained in the frameworks of the medieval poetical collections of the 1760s, are emerging forms of literary nationalism. The Ossian debate sheds a valuable light on the national interests shaping, and ultimately being assimilated into, Britain's developing literary criticism as a result of the crisis they initiate.

The Players in the Ossian Project

Publications touting the virtues of a Scottish literary tradition were not a novelty when *Fragments* appeared in 1760; indeed, its appearance was merely another stage of a nationalist literary movement that had been gathering momentum since the early part of the century. After the Act of Union, Scottish literary culture had taken two directions. Writers such as James Thomson, Robert Blair, and James Beattie⁴ represented the Scottish Augustans, whose works employed assimilative strategies rather than attempting to foster a distinctly Scottish literary tradition. Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730), Blair's *The Grave* (1743), and Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771) were all influential works by Scotsmen that infused the English poetic tradition with the energy of the Celtic poetic tradition in a non-threatening way, emulating the "universal" standards of

civility and elegance policed by London's literary elite. Distinctively Scottish uses of language were removed from their writing with the help of Beattie's *Scotticisms*, and many of their poems, such as Thomson's *Summer*, offered panegyrics on the British nation as a whole. Thomson's *Liberty* and "Rule, Britannia" promoted Scottish assimilation into an English-centred British culture by drawing Celtic traditions into a narrative of British ascendancy. Thomson, John Macqueen has observed, "looked with approval for the rapid approximation of Scotland to England and Europe" (67). He and other Scottish Augustan writers, by adhering to the tastes and desires of London's critics and reading public, were able to advance in the social and political life of the metropolis. "[I]ndividual Scots who were willing to become fully anglicized," Sher has pointed out, "or at least to endure and perhaps excuse English prejudice without taking offence (as Boswell frequently did with Johnson), could gain full immunity" from the prejudice to which Scottish nationalists were subject ("Percy, Shaw. . ." 213). This allowed them to benefit from the growing opportunities Britain's expanding empire had to offer, and many Scotsmen profited from representing Britain in her colonial endeavours.

⁴ Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730), Blair's *The Grave* (1743), and Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771) were all influential works by Scotsmen that conformed to the "universal" register of standards governed by London's literary elite.

Other Scottish writers, however, such as Allan Ramsay, David Herd, and William Wilkie,⁵ cultivated the Scottish vernacular tradition in their writing as a means of emphasizing the uniqueness of Scottish culture and defending against the increasing threat of anglicization. Ramsay's preface to *The Ever Green* (1724), anticipating disapproval from English and anglicized readers, describes how the more simple virtues of poetry drawn from the vernacular tradition are not lost on readers of taste. "I have observed that *Readers* of the best and almost exquisite Discernment," he explains,

frequently complain of our *modern Writing*, as filled with affected Delicacies and studied Refinements, which they would gladly exchange for that natural Strength of Thought and Simplicity of Style our Forefathers practis'd: to such, I hope, the following *Collection of Poems* will not be displeasing. When these good old *Bards* wrote, we had not yet made Use of important Trimmings upon our Cloaths, nor of Foreign Embroidery in our Writings. Their poetry is the product of their own Country, not pilfered and spoiled in the Transportation from abroad: Their Images are native,

⁵ Allan Ramsay's *The Evergreen* (1724) was extremely important in providing momentum for this second stream of Scottish literature (gather more info).

and their Landskips domestic; copied from those fields and meadows we everyday behold. (vii-viii)

The efforts of Ramsay and others were concentrated on reviving an interest in native poetic forms and settings. They drew much of their material from the Highlands, where, mainly because of its isolated and barren landscape, Scottish culture was more unadulterated than in the Lowlands. These writers, however, were unable to appeal to an English audience as effectively as the Scottish Augustans were. Works of the late 1750s, such as John Home's *Douglas* and William Wilkie's *Epigoniad*, while earning Home and Wilkie the titles of the Scottish Shakespeare and the Scottish Homer among readers with Scottish sympathies, had received poor treatment in London.⁶ The Scottish literati were frustrated that Home's *Douglas*, which drew a direct parallel between Scotland and classical Greece and Rome, had not been given full credit by English critics. As Richard Sher has pointed out, David Garrick, London's leading actor and theatrical manager, declared it "unfit for ye stage," and, although the play enjoyed a successful run in London, critics such as Johnson refused to acknowledge its merit (Sher, "Those Scotch Imposters. . .," 57). Most writers

⁶ For a summary of the responses to these works, see Richard B. Sher's article "Those Scotch Imposters and their Cabal': Ossian and the Scottish Enlightenment."

who cultivated literature in the Scottish tradition were only marginally successful because of the anti-Scottish prejudice that existed.

Macpherson's Ossian translations offered a new opportunity for Scottish nationalists to celebrate their native poetry. John Home, whose own play *Douglas* was an ultimate disappointment in London, "discovered" Macpherson and his Gaelic translations. In 1759, Macpherson, accompanying one of his students to the fashionable spa village of Moffat, made Home's acquaintance. Upon learning that Macpherson possessed various medieval Highland manuscripts, Home asked him to translate some of the pieces for him. Pleased with the results, Home showed them to several members of Edinburgh's literary circle. The Edinburgh literati included such luminaries as Hugh Blair, who was to write the definitive *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (1763), Adam Ferguson, whose writings on the role of property in the progress of civilization influenced contemporary notions of civility, and David Hume, one of Britain's foremost philosophers and historians. It was Hugh Blair who headed up efforts to bring Macpherson's translations of ancient Gaelic poetry to light. Blair became Macpherson's mentor for the Ossian project, a plan which involved not only the publication of *Fragments*, but also future collections that would rehabilitate a lost poetic tradition from written manuscripts and oral

sources. Blair lived in the same house as Macpherson as the first volume was being prepared, consulted with him as he worked on translating the manuscripts, and found a publisher for *Fragments*. Blair also wrote the "Preface" to the first Ossian publication, and, along with Lord Elibank, convened a dinner meeting to raise money for the project. Contributors included Adam Ferguson and David Hume, as well as James Boswell, the Scot-turned-Londoner who was later to accompany Samuel Johnson on his famed tour of the Highlands to investigate the authenticity of the manuscripts.

The widespread interest in Macpherson's translations can be accounted for in different ways. Richard B. Sher, for example, has forwarded the idea that many of the men involved in promoting Macpherson's medieval poetry did so because they believed the poems would be helpful in their campaign to gain support for the Militia Bill. The bill attempted to overturn the 1746 legislation prohibiting Scots from bearing arms, a law particularly galling during the threat of the Seven Years' War. John Home wrote to Lord Bute on this subject:

I am sorry to say My lord that this country is in the most wretched situation that ever any country was in which the people were allowed to talk of Liberty. The ignorance of the English and I don't [know] what name to give to the conduct of the Scotch has reduced

us in the midst of alarms, to a state totally defenceless. No Poet that ever foamed with inspiration can express the grief and indignation of those Scots that still love their country, to find themselves disarmed.⁷

Members of the Edinburgh literati—including Home, Blair, Ferguson, William Robertson, and Alexander Carlyle—were also members of the Poker Club which was formed in 1760 to promote the cause of a Scots militia. Sher points out that the Ossian publications, with their emphasis on Scotland's past martial glory, celebrated the nation's role in protecting both itself and its neighbours, thus speaking directly to its vulnerable condition. The poetry was a vehicle through which to express Scottish pride in the nation's past and to lament the country's present condition. Certainly, Sher's argument has merit. Indeed, one contemporary reviewer of *Fingal* was keen to point out that the "valour and genius of that warlike people" of the Highland past had been proved only too recently in the Seven Years' War" (*The Critical Review*, Vol. 15, 200). Anyone who has witnessed the courage of the Highlanders, "who have lately bled so freely in the service of their country," the reviewer maintains, would be unable "to refuse his assent to the authenticity of the poems" (*Ibid*, 200). The irony here would be

⁷ Cited in Sher, ref. Given: Home to Bute, [26] August 1759, Bute MSS, Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, box 2 (1759), no. 147.

thick for eighteenth-century Scottish readers: while Highlanders lost their lives for the cause of Britain at an unprecedented level in the Seven Years' War, they were still not allowed to protect themselves from foreign invasion on their own land.

A more potent attraction of the Ossian poems, however, was their more general appeal to the Edinburgh literati's concern with improving Scotland's rank in the British nation as a whole, which would improve Scotland's role in national identity-making. As both cultural and historical capital, the Ossianic translations were invaluable. Because of their claim to antiquity, the publications were able to tap into the increasing interest in literary reliques, so their publication offered a rare opportunity for Macpherson and Blair to promote their ideas concerning Highland identity in a high-profile arena. Thus, the way the poems were packaged was of the utmost importance. The focus of my examination of the Ossian publications, then, will be geared mainly towards their critical frameworks. From the idea of their publication, to the dissertations used to contextualize them, the Ossian poems were not Macpherson's personal project, but rather emerged under the watchful eyes of members of the Scottish Enlightenment. In radical ways, the poems speak to the fraught issues of Highland identity within the larger scope of the British nation. By directing

attention to the “realities” of Britain’s past, they urge a reconsideration of the status of the Highlands, and of Scotland’s role in determining a British national character. The political legacy of the Highlands is a central concern of the Ossian project and, while it speaks to some of the issues Sher raises, it moves beyond a challenge to the Militia Bill and raises instead an competing version of Celtic Britishness against the London-centred image of the British nation. It calls into question the notion of a Britannia fuelled by a vague notion of “Gothic” liberty and points, instead, to the “historical” evidence of a geographically-rooted Celtic liberty that has persisted in the Highlands since before the Goths even entered “Britannia.”

Celebrating Celtic History

The Ossian publications, while claiming the brilliance of Scotland’s military past, also insisted upon the purity and ancientness of Scottish culture. Given that England had no poetry of a comparable vintage, *Ossian* could stand as the best source of knowledge for the status of the isle of Britain and its culture in the third-century. In *The Making of History*, Ian Haywood discusses how the Ossian poems were acknowledged by many eighteenth-century writers as historical documents. The inclusion, for example, of a passage from *Ossian* in Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-78) to provide historical detail

on the Caledonians demonstrates to what extent Macpherson's publications could affect the historical status of the Highlands. William Stukely, as well, used *Fingal* as documented proof of his theories of the Druids in ancient Britain. Despite the controversy over the poetry's authenticity, Edward Davies remarks in his 1825 edition of the poems that, because of its claim that the northern Celts originally settled in Scotland, not Ireland, "Ossian is [still] confidently quoted as a historical authority. By his sole aid Mr. Macpherson overturns the long established account of the colonization of Britain and Ireland" (v). Fiona Stafford's argument in *The Sublime Savage*, then, that Macpherson's interest in "the knotty problem of the origin of the Scots" in *Temora* is a question "hardly relevant to *Ossian*," overlooks part of its central appeal to Scottish nationalists (151-2). Indeed, the origin of the Scots is a central concern running through every *Ossian* publication, and speaks directly to the notion of Celtic superiority that is touted in many of the critical works affixed to the poems. The claims *Ossian* makes for the origins of the British nation privilege the Highlands over all other regions in Britain.

The poems build their case on two points: that the Celtic, not Gothic, spirit is the wellspring of British liberty; and that Celtic society has survived in its most original form in the Highlands of Scotland. Howard Weinbrot has described the

interest in Celtic history in Europe in the eighteenth century as growing out of comparing the “great and extraordinary” accomplishments of the Celts with those of ancient Rome.⁸ The critical dissertations affixed to the Ossian publications reinforce the legacy of the Celtic past, reminding readers that the Celts were “once the masters of Europe from the mouth of the river Oby, in Russia, to Cape Finisterre, the western point of Galicia in Spain” (Gaskill *Poems* 43). “The Celtae,” Blair is keen to point out, were “a great and mighty people, altogether distinct from the Goths and Teutones” (349). Ultimately, the dissertations denigrate the Sarmatic characteristics of the Anglo-Saxons peopling southern Britain, and compose a narrative of a Celtic legacy that can be traced from its roots in northern Gaul to its last bastion in the Scottish Highlands.

To begin, then, Blair and Macpherson clearly define the difference between Celtic and Gothic tribes. They argue that overall the Celtic tribes, which comprise not only the Highland Celts, but also the Irish Celts, the Britons in Wales, the Gauls, and some groups in Germany, are superior to the northern Gothic tribes, which includes the Saxons and the Danes, in part because “the Celtic tribes clearly appear to have been addicted in so high a degree to poetry” that they were morally refined beyond the level of other barbarous nations (351).

⁸ See Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 481-525.

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UMI

Ossian poems, *The Hunter*, in which England threatens Scottish liberty, and *The Highlander*, where the enemy is Scandinavia. Highlanders prided themselves on maintaining a distinct culture from the Scandinavians, who posed repeated threats of invasion. Highlanders came from "a body of men who were raised, according to the traditions current in the Long island and other parts of the Highlands," J. F. Campbell explains, "To defend both countries against foreign invaders, more especially the Scandinavians" (I:5). Similarly, in a letter Hugh MacDonald explained that "The Scandinavians who invaded the Isles and the Highlands . . . were not able to change the language, or to destroy the monuments of our ancestors: for the descendants of those heroes maintained their independence on the main land, and retained the historical traditions and poetry of their fathers over every part of the country."⁹ In his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, Macpherson maintains that the manner of life of the Anglo-Saxons, or Goths, was "as opposite to those of the Celtæ as the barbarism common to both could permit" (284). He refers to the Gothic practice of drinking ale from the skulls of their enemies, and Blair refers to scenes in *Ossian* where Gothic peoples have a morbid fascination with the corpses of their enemies. These accusations are a direct challenge to the notion of Goths as

⁹ H. Mac Donald, S. Uist, 12 August 1800, *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland*, Appendix 49.

defenders of freedom against Roman despotism and decay; therefore they angered supporters of the Gothic tradition. John Pinkerton, for example, in his anti-Celtic tract *A Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths* (1787), says Macpherson's plan is "to exalt his sweet Celts at the expense of all truth, learning, and common sense" (93). It was not only supporters of the superiority of the "Goths," however, who were offended by the pro-Celtic rhetoric of the Ossian project; even Celtic cultures, such as the Welsh, felt slighted by the panegyrics on the Highland Celts.

The Ossian project excluded the Welsh and other Celtic nations from the all-important depiction of Celtic liberty. The Highlands are figured as the only repository of a true Celtic spirit, and thus Britishness. Ossian was said to have lived in the third-century, the period when the rest of Britain was invaded by Romans, while the Highland Celts alone retained their liberty. Macpherson uses this time period to distinguish between the Highland Celts and other Britons. "After South Britain became a province of Rome," he explains in his "Preface" to *Fingal*, "and its inhabitants began to adopt the language and customs of their conquerors, the Celtae beyond the pale of their empire, considered them as distinct people, and consequently treated them as enemies" (37). Thus, even the Welsh, Macpherson argues, who originated from the same Celtic tribes as

Highlanders, have been irrevocably altered from their original Celtic character. It is only in the barren, inaccessible terrain of the Highlands that the cultural tradition of the Celts is able to survive. "The ancient language, and the traditional history of the [Celtic] nation," Macpherson explains, "became confined entirely to the inhabitants of the Highlands" (223), a region that remained "free of intermixture with foreigners" (206). Even Lowland Scots have lost contact with their Celtic roots. After the retreat of the Romans from Britain, Macpherson explains in his "Dissertation" introducing *Temora*, Scots began to infiltrate northern parts of England, which brought about "a total change in the genius of the Scots nation" (212). The Caledonians, who remained in the Highlands, preserved their Celtic traditions, living "in a rural kind of magnificence. . . . free and independent" (213). Macpherson fashions the Highland Celts as the repository of true British culture, and by doing so insinuates their right to play a central role in the definition of British national character.

Political Liberty in the Highlands

Intrinsic to Macpherson and Blair's portrayal of the Highland Celts is the vision of a society that enjoys the political liberties so valued in eighteenth-century Britain. This notion of Celtic liberty challenged English stereotypes of

Scotland as a nation lacking the democratic virtues of England's parliamentary system. As Linda Colley points out, the newly-developing sense of British nationhood issuing out of London ignored or deliberately excluded Highlanders. John Free, for example, preached in 1756 that Englishmen, Lowland Scots and Hanoverians were all Saxons, and that since the Welsh were ancient Britons, they should all live in harmony; Highland Scots, however, were notoriously absent from this call for unity. The '45 rebellion, of course, had calcified the animosity between Highlanders and their southern neighbours, who now had tangible proof of the association of northern Scots with Jacobitism and the notion of arbitrary power so antithetical to the democratic roots of Gothic liberty. Thomas Gibbons warned that the rebels were trying to "tear up Liberty / From its fair Roots, and perish it forever" (6). Samuel Boyse in 1748 described "the *Highland-Tenures*" as Stuart vestiges where a "*slavish Dependance of the Clans upon the absolute Will of their Superiors,*" he warned, dangerously allowed "the Exercise of . . . Authority distinct from that of the Legislature" (179). In 1762, Wilkes points out in the *North Briton* that the Union is a direct threat to English liberty in the following allegory:

Some time since died Mr. John Bull, a very worthy, plain, honest old gentleman, of Saxon descent; he was choaked by inadvertently

swallowing a thistle, which he had placed by way of ornament on the top of his sallad. For many years before he had enjoyed a remarkably good state of health. (qtd. in Speck 77)

John Bull, the mascot of Englishness, meets his demise because he incorporates Scotland into the British nation, rather than keeping it as an “ornament” to England. For Wilkes, Scotland connotes despotism and all things un-English and undemocratic. “The principal part of the Scottish nobility are tyrants and the whole of the common people are slaves,” he writes in *The North Briton* in 1763. Samuel Johnson had a similarly negative attitude towards the Scots, and so, while praising David Dalrymple’s *Annals of Scotland* (1776) suggested he change his description of his country as “a free nation” to “a brave nation,” intimating that Scotland’s strength lay in the barbarous and warlike character of its inhabitants, rather than in its love of liberty. In the minds of many Englishmen, then, liberty was the distinctive characteristic of England, not Scotland. The discourse of English liberty was being directed against, not only foreign countries, as seen in Thomson’s *Liberty*, but also the Highland Scots.

In the Ossian publications, however, England’s claim to being the home of liberty is pointedly undermined. By providing a genealogy of Scottish liberty, Macpherson’s works juxtapose the independence of the Highland past with

England's long history of subjection to foreign yokes. By exploiting the eighteenth-century obsession with national purity and fear of the corrupting potential of foreign influences, the poems champion Highlanders as national defenders. The piece "Comála: A Dramatic Poem," for example, celebrates Fingal's defeat of a Roman expedition led by Caracalla against the Caledonians, *Fingal* describes the Highland Celts protecting the Irish from foreign invaders, and "Carthon: A Poem" points to the Highlands as the source of heroism among the Britons.¹⁰ Liberty thrives in the Highlands because its inhabitants have a "natural" love of independence, and a dislike of foreigners, bred in part by the isolation its harsh landscape promotes. It is the English—the "Hateful slavery" of "th' aspiring Rose" (III: 12) described in Macpherson's own poem "The Hunter" — who are depicted as a threat to Scottish liberty.

The Ossian publications also promote the idea that the political history of the Highlands is one of freedom, not tyranny. Deploying a strategy that was so effective for the development of the notion of "Gothic" liberty in England, the poems and their accompanying dissertations locate the roots of democracy in the hills of Morven. The clan system which receives so much negative press in the *North Briton* is defended by Macpherson, who argues that the chiefs "partook

¹⁰ In "Carthon: A Poem," Carthon, a leader of the Britons who brought them fame and success in battle, is linked directly to Fingal's race and is, in death, reunited with his people in the

more the authority of a father, than of the rigour of a judge," allowing Celts to live "free and independent" (213). He claims that the origins of mixed government are to be found in the Celtic past, where "The form of their government was a mixture of aristocracy and monarchy" (44). He details this theory more fully in his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain* (1771). Here, he maintains that "It is certain that the ancient Britons . . . had their general assemblies of people in which all affairs were decided by the plurality of voices," and he refers to "the democratical meetings of the Celtic nations" (248-9). Leith Davis has pointed out that, in mentioning the origins of democracy in his *Introduction*, Macpherson draws a parallel between the ancient origins of Celtic government and the British government of his own day. By doing so, Davis argues, he points to the potentially beneficial effects of such an argument in the context of the Union. It is my contention, however, that English readers would see the claim to the democratic roots of Scottish government as threatening. "Gothic antiquity" Samuel Klinger points out, "had become for England a Golden Age, a symbol of a successful democracy" (33). Macpherson's project substitutes for this symbol a Celtic Golden Age and highlights what he refers to as a Goth's "natural love of depredation" (*Introduction*, 332).

Highlands where his sword is hung in the hall in Morven.

Religion and Liberty

Similarly, the English championing of Protestantism as an inevitable result of England's "Gothic" roots¹¹ is countered with the outlining of a Celtic a native religion in the dissertations on the Ossian poems. In 1741 the SSPCK (Society in Scotland for Propogating Christian Knowledge) reported that the Highlands were the home of "Ignorance, Popish, and even Heathenish Superstition, Profaneness, Idleness, Theft, and many other Disorders" (qtd in Stafford, 7). Macpherson's publications challenge this claim by contrasting the "pure" Christianity located in England's Gothic past with a religious tradition indigenous to the Highlands that never exerted tyrannical control over government. The poems of Ossian are significantly set in the time period between the fall of the Druids and the infancy of Christianity in northern Britain. Macpherson points to Druidism as the foundation, but not the dictator, of the morality of Ossian's society. Druidism had a tarnished reputation among eighteenth-century thinkers because of its association with the practice of human sacrifice. William Stukely maintained, however, that patriarchal Druidism was consistent with Christianity and supported "*the spirit of Christianity*" that is best preserved "*in the Church of England*" (*Stonehenge*, 1). By deliberately pinpointing

the setting of *Ossian* in the marginal threshold between Druidism and Christianity, Macpherson is able to escape the negative characteristics of Druidism, but passes its spiritual morality reminiscent of Christianity through the bardic tradition, by stressing the moral teachings the Druids passed on to the bards.

Although a monk is mentioned in a poem in *Fragments*, Blair assures readers in the "Preface" that this indicates the early stages of Christianity in Scotland:

In a fragment of the same poems, which the translator has seen, a Culdee or Monk is represented as desirous to take down in writing from the mouth of Oscian, who is the principal personage in several of the following fragments, his warlike achievements and those of his family. But Oscian treats the Monk and his religion with disdain, telling him, that deeds of such great men were subjects too high to be recorded by him, or by any of his religion: A full proof that Christianity was not yet established in the country.

(5)

Blair's insistence that the poems are coeval with the infancy of Christianity allows the *Ossian* poems to stand for a Celtic spirit untainted by popery, and

¹¹ See Reginald Horsman, "Liberty and the Anglo-Saxons" in *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University press,

Macpherson argues strongly against the presence of Druids in Ossian's world. The Druids, he claimed, had gained such esteem among the Highland people, which "a cunning and ambitious tribe of men took care to improve," that they "ingrossed the management of civil, as well as religious, matters" (44). Ultimately, they attempted to disrupt the hereditary transfer of power of the Vergobretus, or chief magistrate, who was Fingal's grandfather. The Druids, attempting to force the Vergobretus to abdicate his position in favour of their own choice for ruler, precipitated a civil war and ended up being close to exterminated. A group as potentially invasive, corrupt, and tyrannical as the English felt the Roman Catholic church was, the Druids are ultimately destroyed because of the "free" spirit of the Celts. The eighteenth-century Whig version of history, envisioned as a constant battle of the "Gothic" spirit of liberty fighting against tyranny, is here rooted in Highland history. The extinction of the Druids stands as a testimony to the Highland Celts' fierce desire for liberty and suggests, implicitly, that the English laboured for too long under Catholic rule.

Macpherson is keen to point out, however, that the destruction of the Druids does not mean that Ossian's people are without moral values. Bards such as Ossian, Macpherson explains, have had "their minds opened, and their ideas enlarged" by their exposure to the Druidic order, although they are free of many

of the superstitious encumbrances of the Druidic religion itself (48). Macpherson explains that the bards, by praising and idealizing heroic virtues, perpetuate a cycle of emulation that "formed at last the general character of the nation, happily compounded of what is noble in barbarity, and virtuous and generous in a polished people"(48). The ennobling influence of the bards is accentuated in the poems, where "words of other times. . . are like the calm shower of spring" (62). The wisdom of the Druids is absorbed into the bardic tradition and is ultimately replaced by it. "The moral character of our ancestors," Macpherson asserts, "owed more to the compositions of the bard than to the precepts of the Druid" (*Introduction*, 210). This marginal threshold the bards occupy allows Macpherson to develop a Highland model of religious liberty unencumbered by the superstitious associations of Druidism and Catholicism. Macpherson is keen to point out the beneficial influence of the bards on government. By singing the praises of a perfect hero, they encourage "inferior chiefs . . . [to make this] the model of their conduct" and flatter the prince, who then endeavours "to excel his people in merit" (48). The power of the bards is tempered in the Highland system, so that, while the bards encourage benevolent rule, they do not, like the Druids, try to assume control of political decisions. Even the Christians who came to Scotland, Macpherson points out, assumed a more limited role than the

Druids. They took possession of the cells and groves once occupied by the Druids, and lived in retirement. Thus, the religious history of Scotland is depicted as one which values the moral benefits of religion, but places the highest premium on freedom.

Civility and National Identity

I have described so far how the Ossian project cultivated the notion of a Celtic spirit of liberty that predated or surpassed England's "Gothic" tradition on all fronts. Also associated with the English "Gothic" legacy, however, was the civilizing imperative that accompanied the protection of these liberties, such as we see in Gray's "The Progress of Poesy." Scotland, framed as the primitive and barbarous wilds to the north, was of course excluded from such a narrative of progress, but in the Ossian project the values of "civility" are clearly displayed. While *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* brandished detached poetical pieces, *Fingal* and *Temora* were assembled on a grander scale. Hugh Blair actively urged Macpherson to collect poetry in the Highlands that constituted what he referred to as "our epics."¹² The plan for an epic had already been outlined in Blair's "Preface" to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, where he had written,

Though the poems now appear as detached pieces in this collection, there is ground to believe that most of them were originally

episodes of a greater work which related to the wars of Fingal. . . .

In particular there is reason to hope that one work of considerable length, and which deserves to be styled an heroic poem, might be recovered and translated, if encouragement were given to such an undertaking. (v, vii)

The epic form, a hallmark of classical culture, would assert the venerable tradition of the Celtic Highlands.

The shift from the collection of poetic fragments to a full-blown epic, however, was not as favourably received as Blair and his peers might have hoped. Critics such as Thomas Gray, who had shown approbation for *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, were resistant to the idea of a Highland epic. “[T]here is a sort of plan and unity in it very strange for a barbarous age,” Gray remarked, “what I admire more are some of the more detached pieces” (Saunders, 174). For Gray, as long as the Ossianic poetry represented savagery and not refinement, sublimity but not beauty, it was desirable. Horace Walpole agreed, declaring that an epic in six books could never be preserved among savages (Saunders, 173). Escaping from classifications of barbarity and savagery was exactly what Blair and Macpherson had hoped to do with their two epic productions, but immediate concerns voiced about the authenticity of the epics meant that the

¹² Blair to David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes, 23 June 1760.

claims made in the Ossian publications would be contingent upon the outcome of a never-ending debate.

The most substantial opponent of the Ossian project rose in the form of Samuel Johnson, whose *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1773) was incalculably damaging to the reputation of the poems.¹³ With his love for London, his neoclassical tastes, and his reverence for the printed word and standardized language, Johnson was not inclined to approve of giving status to Celtic poetry preserved through oral tradition. Johnson promoted the cultivation of knowledge and civilized society, and his *Dictionary* celebrates the progress, standardization, and triumph of the English language. The combination of learned classical values, and the spirit of “Gothic” liberty, was Johnson’s model for English literary genius. The Ossian epics threatened this model with the image of an uneducated, illiterate, and, by Johnson’s standards, “savage” bard, whose poetry exhibited “civilized” values in a “barbarous” time.

¹³ While works such as Warner’s *Remarks on the History of Fingal and Other Poems of Ossian* (1762) and the anonymous *Fingal, King of Morven: A Knight-Errant* (1764) appeared soon after the publication of *Ossian* in an attempt to claim that Ossian was an Irish or English poet, it was not until after the publication of Samuel Johnson’s *Journey* in 1773 that the controversy reached its fevered pitch. Publications such as McNicol’s *Remarks on Dr. Samuel Johnson’s Journey to the Hebrides* (London 1779), John Clark’s *An Answer to Mr. Shaw’s Enquiry* (1781) spoke in reaction to the charges against Macpherson that Johnson and his accomplices made, while Shaw’s *An Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems Ascribed to Ossian* (1781) and his *Reply to Mr. Clark’s Answer* 1782 supported Johnson’s stance.

Johnson's disdain for things Scottish would have predisposed him to oppose Ossian, for he was disparaging of a culture where his version of progress based on economic improvements was not a foremost concern. "If he was particularly prejudiced against the Scots [more than of the peoples of other nations]," Boswell writes in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, "it was because they were more in his way; because he thought their success in *England* rather exceeded the due proportion of their real merit" (11). Johnson critiques the lack of agricultural improvements in Scotland in his *Journey*, and claims that Scotland's only redeeming asset is the civilizing influence it receives from its union with England.¹⁴ His prejudice against the Scots nation translated into his literary criticism. Johnson was one of the detractors of Home's *Douglas*, and attributed whatever success Scottish writers might have to the national bias of their fellow countrymen. "[N]o Scotsman publishes a book, or has a play brought upon the stage" he accuses, "but there are five hundred people ready to applaud him." Of Hugh Blair, who, besides defending Macpherson's Ossian publications also published his famous *Sermons*, Johnson is grudgingly admiring, qualifying his praise with his observation that "the dog is a Scotchman, and a Presbyterian, everything he should not be" (qtd. in Sher, "Percy, Shaw. . .", 215).

¹⁴ Johnson was aggressively anti-Unionist, remarking once, "It is not so much to be lamented that Old England is lost, as that the Scotch have found it."

It should not be surprising, then, that Johnson was ready to denigrate the value of the Ossian poems. In a letter to Walter Scott, Anna Seward explains her attitude towards Johnson's comments on *Ossian* in his *Journey*:

Dr. Johnson's scornful assertions on the subject, have no weight with me; believing, as I ever have done, that his impatient jealousy of a new classic, of such high antiquity, emerging from the mists of time, and in the land of his detestation, was the motive for his journey to Scotland; that he went thither for the express purpose of giving weight and credence to his verdict in a cause which he had prejudged, long before he pretended to examine the evidence.

(*Letters*, VI:277)

What is remarkable, however, is the energy and persistence with which Johnson fought to establish the spuriousness of the Ossian poems, which suggest that more was at stake with Johnson's campaign against Macpherson's publications than mere prejudice.

Samuel Johnson chose to focus his critical energies against the oral sources of the publications, for what seemed to irk him most was the fact that the poems pushed against the grain of his model of progress and civility. By focussing his arguments on written language, Johnson was able to bring into play all of his

pronouncements on the progress and standardization of English. Pointing to the orality of Highland culture, Johnson argued--in a rather circular manner--that without manuscripts, the Ossian epics could not be authenticated, and because "A nation that cannot write, or a language that was never written, has no manuscripts," Macpherson's Ossianic epic was therefore a forgery. Where oral evidence was concerned, Johnson was aggressively dismissive. Indeed, in his *Journey to the Western Islands*, he asserted that no work of any significant length could be transmitted orally:

In an unwritten speech, nothing that is very short is transmitted from one generation to another. Few have opportunities of hearing a long composition often enough to learn it, or have inclination to repeat it so often as is necessary to retain it: and what is once forgotten is lost forever. (87)

Despite the fact that Highland heritage, including battle history and clan lineage, *had* been preserved orally in Gaelic since Edward I's reign in the thirteenth century forced the destruction of much of Scotland's written history, Johnson maintained the impossibility of such a thing happening with *Fingal*. Ultimately, his position on *Ossian* was determined by the value he placed on the relationship between civility and literacy.

The “civilizing” impetus of the written word is paramount in Johnson’s ideas on language and culture. His attack on the orality of *Ossian* is bound up in the discourse of progress that dominated intellectual debate in the eighteenth century. As Robert Crawford has pointed out, thinkers in this period were preoccupied with different theories of historical development, in particular with how cultures developed from the primitive to the civilized. Johnson’s focus on the oral transmission of the Ossian poems seeks to place the Scottish Highlands firmly in the primitive stage (Crawford 16). In the preface to his *Dictionary* Johnson’s belief in the “savagery” of oral cultures is clear:

As language was at its beginning merely oral, all words of necessary or common use were spoken before they were written. . . . When this *wild* and *barbarous* jargon was first reduced to an alphabet, every penman endeavoured to express, as he could, the sounds which he was accustomed to pronounce or to receive. . . . (i)

For Johnson, it was only when this “*wild* and *barbarous* jargon” assumed a written form that society began to espouse more civilized values. Civility and literacy went hand in hand. “[L]etters are a thing so necessary to men,” Johnson maintained, “that without them they are true beasts” (qtd. in Hudson, 164).

By targeting the “depraved” national character of the Scots, Johnson was able to charge that their oral evidence was undependable. He accused Macpherson of translating part of his work into Gaelic, teaching a boy to write it, and telling the boy to claim he had learned it from his grandmother. In his *Journey* he undermines the validity of oral evidence by describing how he was given three different answers on the nature and fate of the Bards. He argued that the Scottish claim that stories of Fingal were familiar to Highlanders was a result of Macpherson inserting well-known images into his own poetry, to “make an inaccurate auditor imagine, by the help of Caledonian bigotry, that he has formerly heard the whole” (88). And, in one of his most explicit criticisms on the Scottish nation, he explains:

The Scots have something to plead for their easy reception of an improbable fiction: they are seduced by their fondness for their supposed ancestors. A Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist, who does not love *Scotland* better than the truth: he will always love it better than inquiry; and if falsehood flatters his vanity, will not be very diligent to detect it. (89)

Johnson's focus on the immorality of the Scots extends to the bards Blair reverently describes as positive moral influences in his "Preface" to *Fragments*.

He undermines their status in medieval Scotland:

That the Bards could not read more than the rest of their countrymen, it is reasonable to suppose. . . and how high their compositions may reasonably be rated, an enquirer must best judge by considering what stores of imagery, what principles of ratiocination, what comprehension of knowledge, and what delicacy of elocution he has known any man to attain who cannot read. The state of the Bard was yet more hopeless. He that cannot read, may now converse with those that can; but the Bard was a barbarian among barbarians, who, knowing nothing himself, lived with others that knew no more. (87)

Johnson's notion of a stagnant, ignorant medieval Highland community, whose moral improvement was stunted by their reliance on oral culture, is at odds with the depiction of elevated sentiment in the poems themselves, and of the description of bards who have "their minds opened, and their ideas enlarged" by their exposure to the Druidic order.

Macpherson and his supporters contest the notion of the savagery of oral cultures in several ways. They argue, for one, that this “primitive” stage of culture allowed for the imaginative quality of the poems. “As the world advances,” Hugh Blair argues in his *Dissertation*, “the understanding gains ground upon the imagination; the understanding is more exercised; the imagination, less” (346). With the free reign of imagination comes a poetic turn to the language. “In the infancy of societies,” Blair explains,

men lived scattered and dispersed, in the midst of solitary rural scenes, where the beauties of nature are their chief entertainment. . . . Their passions have nothing to restrain them; their imagination has nothing to check it. . . . As their feelings are strong, so their language, of itself, assumes a poetical turn. (Gaskill 345)

In part, Blair attributes the poetical turn of the language to its rudimentary nature. The lack of “improvement” in the language is, for Blair, actually its strength. He posits that it is because of a want of terms that works like Ossian excel in figurative language. “The language [of Ossian] has all that figurative cast, which,” he explains, “partly a glowing and undisciplined imagination, partly the sterility of language and the want of proper terms, have always introduced into the early speech of nations” (354). Thomas Blackwell, whose

theorization of language at the University of Aberdeen undoubtedly had an effect on Macpherson,¹⁵ provided an alternate model to Johnson's emphasis on improving language through writing. "[W]hat we call *Polishing*," he explains, "diminishes a Language." For Blackwell, the polishing of language corrupts its natural powers. For Thomas Reid, one of Macpherson's tutors at the University of Aberdeen, written language diminished the expressiveness of language. "Artificial signs signify," he wrote,

But they do not express; they speak to the understanding, as algebraic characters may do, but the passions, the affections, and the will, hear them not. . . if this is the perfection of artificial language, surely it is the corruption of the natural. (Reid, 118)

Supporters of *Ossian* also made direct comparisons to Homer in order to claim that primitive societies produced more imaginative poetry.¹⁶ While Homer was conspicuously absent from anti-Ossian debate, perhaps because for critics like Johnson their emphasis on civility and progress would be made vulnerable, supporters of *Ossian* underscored the similarities between the two bards for, as Blair admitted, "We are naturally led to run a parallel in some

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of Blackwell's influence at the University of Aberdeen, see Fiona Stafford's discussion of this in *The Sublime Savage*, pp. 28-32.

instances between the Greek and the Celtic bard" (357). In the appendix to his *Dissertation*, Blair points out that "Ossian has been always reputed the Homer of the Highlands" (403). He maintains, however, that Ossian displays greater imaginative capabilities. Because the Greek poet possesses the experience of a society that is further advanced than the Highlands, Blair's argument runs, his poetry is more diverse and reveals a deeper knowledge of human nature. But the kind of knowledge Homer possesses over Ossian – knowledge of cities, laws, order and discipline – do not, according to Blair, disadvantage Ossian. Rather, Ossian's subjects are still "of the kind fittest for poetry. . . .they strike the imagination, and fire the passions in a higher degree. . . ." (357). Homer is more cheerful; whereas Ossian uniformly maintains the gravity and solemnity of a Celtic hero. "With regard to dignity of sentiment," Blair urges, "the pre-eminence must clearly be given to Ossian" (358).

The poems themselves celebrate oral storytelling as a civilizing influence.

In *Fingal*, for example, Cuchullin, the Irish chief, tells his bard Carril:

Pleasant is thy voice, O Carril, said the blue-eyed chief of Erin; and
lovely are the words of other times. They are like the calm shower

¹⁶ "[T]here is not in Homer, nor in Virgil," writes one reviewer of *Fingal*, "a character which equals that of the venerable Ossian himself, second to his father in virtue and valour, and superior to all in sublimity of genius." (*The Critical Review*, 13:53).

of spring when the sun looks on the field, and the light cloud flies
over the hill. (62)

Here, as elsewhere in *Ossian*, the bard and his tales function as peaceful, civilizing, mediums through which melancholic reflections can pass. Indeed, the “pleasant” voice, the “lovely” words from the past, influence the listener aurally, exerting a harmonizing influence similar to that of music. Fingal lived, Blair explains “in a sort of classical age, enlightened by the memorials of former times, which were conveyed in the songs of the bards” (352). Ossian himself figures the bard as a figure of enlightenment. Some words, he explains, are “dark as the tales of other times, before the light of song arose” (112-113). The Ossian poems, then, in opposition to Johnson’s paradigm of civility and literacy, present their aurality as a contributing factor to their society’s level of refinement.

The Ossian project challenges the kind of notions of English civility that Johnson espouses by presenting a Highland version of primitivism for which Rousseau had helped cultivate a taste. The poems present a Highland society in its infancy that nonetheless exhibits the more “civilized” virtue of sentimentality. They also challenge classical models by presenting poems that depict the heroic virtues of Homeric heroes, but display, as Blair argues, greater imaginative powers because they issue out of a society that is more primitive. The bardic

tradition functions as the civilizing influence on ancient Highland society, encouraging its members to act heroically and revere the past. Thus, the Ossian project works point to the relative dearth of such a tradition preserved in an English past. Indeed, in Blair's *Dissertation* he describes how the Scandinavians (whose nation was believed to be the "womb" for the Gothic tribes) were much more savage than the Celts. He quotes poetry from the eighth century poet and king Regner Lodbrog and explains that these remnants of "true Gothic poetry" breathe "a most ferocious spirit" that is "wild, harsh, and irregular" (349). The difference between this poetry and Ossian's poetry, Blair explains, is that the Celtic attachment to poetry, and their bards, has elevated their sentiment, and created a mixture of primitive culture with moral and heroic virtues that, Blair implies, is superior to either the savage primitivism of the ancient Goths, or the greed and avarice associated with "civilized" metropolises such as London.

Purity and the Gaelic Language

The uniqueness and purity of the Gaelic language was celebrated in the Ossian dissertations. Countering Johnson's paradigm of the supremacy of the English language, Blair and Macpherson praised the virtues of the Gaelic tongue. They insisted, for example, that it was the sounds of the words in the Gaelic

language that allowed it to be preserved through oral tradition. "Each verse was so connected with those which preceded or followed it," Macpherson explains,

that if one line had been remembered in a stanza, it was almost impossible to forget the rest. The cadences followed in so natural a gradation, and the words were so adapted to the common turn of voice, after it is raised to a certain key, that it was almost impossible, from a similarity of sound, to substitute one word for another. This excellence is peculiar to the Celtic tongue, and is perhaps to be met in no other language. (*Gaskill Poems* 49)

Johnson, however, did not share Macpherson's enthusiasm for the Celtic tongue as it manifested itself in Gaelic. Instead, he denigrated the Earse language. Speaking of the Gaelic language in his *Journey*, he was particularly critical:

Of the Earse language, as I understand nothing, I cannot say more than I have been told. It is the rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express, and were content, as they conceived grossly, to be grossly misunderstood. . . . The Welsh, two hundred years ago, insulted their English neighbours for the instability of their Orthography; while the *Earse* merely floated in

the breath of the people, and could therefore receive little improvement. (86)

Johnson compliments instead the stability of the Welsh language, and its affiliation with the development of British civilization.

Supporters of the Ossian poems maintained that it was precisely because Highland culture was removed from this narrative of progress that its language was stable. Dr. John Macpherson's *Critical Dissertation on the Origin. . . of the Ancient Caledonians* (1768) attributes the preservation of language to the environment rather than the written word. "[R]emote isles," Dr. John Macpherson writes,

secur'd by tempestuous seas, and mountainous tracts of land,
 environed with rocks, woods and morasses, defended by a warlike
 race of men, and sterile enough not to encourage the avarice or
 ambition of strangers, are the best means to fix and perpetuate a
 language. (122)

His history also opposes Johnson's claim for the stability of the Welsh language. "Everyone knows," he points out, "that the Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans had bloody contests with the ancient Kymri," the inhabitants of Wales (123). He maintains that because of this, while the Welsh struggled bravely for

their liberty, they were ultimately enslaved and their language suffered. The Highland Celts, on the other hand, were able to maintain traditions to an unrivalled extent. “[T]radition,” Blair writes of the poems in his *Dissertation*, “in a country so free of intermixture with foreigners, and among a people so attached to the memory of their ancestors, has preserved many of them in a great measure uncorrupted to this day” (vi). Preservation, not progress, was the pedestal upon which Highland culture was mounted.

The Ossian project’s glorification of the Gaelic language above others was supported by contemporary beliefs about the venerability of the Celtic language. Gaelic was one of the oldest languages in western civilization, and many thought of it with the same veneration as Hebrew. Indeed, Highlanders went as far to claim that their language was associated with Adam’s and Eve’s,¹⁷ while English was a mixture of different languages. The “purity” of the Scottish language and the “Scotticisms” that Scottish Augustans tried to eliminate in their writings, were, for some Highlanders, a mark of the superiority of their language.¹⁸ For them, ancientness was a greater claim than innovation, for as Stafford has pointed out, this purity of language was a testament both to the uniqueness of

¹⁷ See, for example, Alexander MacDonald’s *Ais-Eiridh na Sean Chánoin Albannich* (“The Resurrection of the Scottish Language”), Edinburgh, 1751.

¹⁸ See A. MacDonald, *The Resurrection of the Ancient Scottish Language*, Edinburgh, 1751. 15.

Celtic identity and to the strength of Highland culture. In 1755 Jerome Stone pointed to Samuel Johnson's neglect of Celtic etymologies in his *Dictionary*, and in the following year referred to Celtic as the "parent" of the Saxon language.¹⁹ Rowland Jones claimed in 1763 that Celtic was the Titanic language that had inspired all classical tongues.²⁰ In a letter of 1806, Alexander Maclaurin asserted that Gaelic was "the Mother of all the Languages in Europe, and . . . not derived from any other Language whatsoever" and described the Celts' movement from Asia to Scotland, saying that "neither the Romans, nor the Danes or Norwiegans, the Saxons, nor the French were ever able to conquer the Gael. . . they kept their Country, their Language, and their Manners unto this day."²¹ The ancientness of the Celtic language was proof of racial purity.

Interestingly, detractors of *Ossian*, such as Samuel Johnson, did not attempt to undermine the status of the Celtic languages in general; rather, they, pointed to the Welsh language as the one most closely resembling the Celtic original because of its written tradition. Thomas Percy was keen to point out that the language of the Highlanders had not retained its integrity as Macpherson claimed, pointing to the diversities of dialect within the Highlands.

¹⁹ *Scots Magazine*, 17 (1755), 91-2; *Scots Magazine*, 18 (1756), 341.

²⁰ Rowland Jones, *Hieroglyphic: or, A Grammatical Introduction to an Universal Hieroglyphic Language; consisting of English Signs and Voices* (1763), pp. A3v-A4r (quoted in Groom, 81)

²¹ A. Maclaurin, 18 July 1806, ADV MS 73.211, f. 56.

“His assertion about the incorruptibility of the Erse language,” Percy writes in a letter to the Welsh scholar Evan Evans in July 1764,

and its having received no alterations during a course of many ages, is considered in the light it deserves, when all the world knows that there are hardly two glens on the Highlands which speak the same dialect: and that often inhabitants of two different sides of a mountain, hardly understand one another when they meet, so widely does the Erse differ: in short, all the difference of dialect that prevails in any other language, (Welsh or English for instance) prevails, I am assured, by competent judges, in the Gallic Tongue. (*Percy Letters*, 96).

Percy here, while perhaps making a forceful argument against the purity of the Gaelic language, at the same time undercuts Johnson’s assertion about the stability of written language, for in his comment Welsh, English and Gaelic are equally volatile. Evan Evans, who was to publish a collection of medieval Welsh translations in an effort to rival Macpherson’s Ossian poems, was adamant that the Welsh retained the Celtic language in its purest form. In his response to Percy he explains:

For the Celtae properly so called were the inhabitants of ancient Gaul, great Britain and Ireland, but are confined at this day within the narrow compass of Wales Bass Bretagne and Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland. But the two last are mixed with numerous colonies of other nations particularly the Cambrians from Spain, in so much that their language is very corrupted. So that the Welsh and the Breton are the most pure dialects of the Celtic in this day extant. (91-2)

These reactions to the claims *Ossian* made for the Celtic language point once again to the fraught issue of the medieval identities that inform notions of British nationality. Samuel Johnson refers to languages as “the pedigrees of nations,” and while his own *Dictionary* seeks to tease out the heterogenous aspects of the English language, Macpherson’s project touts the integrity of the Gaelic language, an integrity which the English language can never claim.

Environment and National Character

In the *Ossian* poems the Gaelic language is intimately linked to the geography of the Highlands. Macpherson, in his *Introduction*, makes the following claim:

Conquest may confine the bounds of a language; commerce may corrupt it; new inventions, by introducing new words, may throw the old into disuse; a change in the mode of thinking may alter the idiom: but . . . [language] retires from invasion into rocks and deserts [sic]; it subsists with the remains of a people; even mountains and rivers in part retain it when people are no more.

(255-56)

Throughout the Ossian poems, the landscape stands as the representative of the distinct culture of the Highlands. Enmeshed in the natural descriptions of the poems – “the mossy fountain,” “the hill of the winds,” and “dark waves” – is a geographically-specific map of the Highlands. “Were it necessary,” one critic explains, “it would be easy to demonstrate the scene of Fingal’s residence, from the topography of the country, many passages in Ossian’s two epic poems exactly corresponding with its present appearance” (*The Critical Review*, 15: 201). This geographical correspondence, in an area untouched by foreign invaders and minimally affected by the changes associated with urbanization, testifies not only to the resilience of Highland culture, but also to the character of its inhabitants, who are “unadulterated” by the negative effects of “progress.” The use of specific place-names further establishes the importance of setting in the poems.

Anna Seward, herself a local poet resisting London values, approves of Ossian's use of the "local" rather than the "general" name, claiming it as "highly favourable to descriptive poetry" (IV: 267). This technique refuses to conform to London's "universal" standards, but rather insists on building up the Highlands as a site of cultural identity that is geographically rooted. "Even a mountain, a sea, or a lake, which he [Ossian] has occasion to mention," Hugh Blair explains in his pro-Ossian *Dissertation*, "though only in simile, are for the most part particularized; it is the hill of Cromla, the storm of the sea of Malmor, or the reeds of the lake of Lego" (354-55). These names conjure up the Highland past, with its distinct linguistic, geographic and cultural pedigree. They encourage readers to imagine the Highlands themselves, to root the courage and sensibility of *Ossian's* heroes in their landscape, and they resist incorporation into a homogenous "British" configuration. The cultural identity developed in *Ossian* is built—literally—from the ground up, through the interaction between specific places and the people inhabiting them.

Supporters of *Ossian*, for whom its status as a historical document was as important as its significance as a specimen of third-century Highland culture, claimed that the names of places and heroes used in the poems were their most authentic aspect: "most of the names are familiar to every ear accustomed to the

historical tradition of the West Highlands," *The Critical Review* states, "The very name of *Morven*, the kingdom of Fingal, still remains; and dogs in that country are frequently called by the appellations of the poet Ossian's principal figures, *Funechal*, or *Fingal*, *Oscar*, *Fillian*, *Call* or *Gaul*, and *Connal*" (*The Critical Review*, 15: 201). The use of place-names to particularize the landscape is a means of claiming the glory of Fingal and his people for Highland culture. Moreover, this persistence of language, if only in the place names of the Highlands, reminds readers that Highland culture is still very much alive, and, indeed, cannot be erased as long as the distinct region in which it developed remains.

The relationship between the landscape of the poems and the Celtic identity they are defining is a pivotal issue for the Ossian project, because the "sublime" descriptions in Ossian's verse can be connected to Highland character in two distinct ways. The barbarism of which Johnson speaks in his comments on the Ossian poems was also felt by many critics with English sympathies to stem from the ruggedness of the region's landscape. There was a sublimity associated with the Highland landscape in the eighteenth century which, while making it an appropriate scene of contemplation, precluded it from any active role in the creation of British culture. The mountainous regions of the Highlands, with their craggy peaks and dark glens, had a romantic atmosphere that held a

terrible fascination for their southern neighbours.²² The type of character this landscape bred, however, was thought to be brutal and savage. John Pinkerton, who is notorious for his anti-Celtic sentiment in his *Dissertation on the Origin of the Scythians and the Goths*, laments that Scottish poems are often tainted with the “ferocity” of Highland culture (xxxvii). James Beattie describes how Highlanders are unavoidably molded by their native landscape: “Long tracts of mountainous desert covered with dark heath,” he explains, and “a soil so rugged, and a climate so dreary, as in many parts to admit neither amusements of pasturage, nor the labours of agriculture” draw “a gloom over the fancy” that “overshadow[s] the imagination of even the hardiest native” (*Essays* 181-82). Both the rough terrain, Beattie argues, and the inability of natives to support themselves by any other means but hunting, fishing and war, foster a character unable to express refined sentiment. “What then,” Beattie asks,

would it be reasonable to expect. . . from the musicians and poets of such a region? Strains expressive of joy, tranquility, or the softer passions? No. Their style must be better suited to their circumstance. And so we find that their music is. The wildest

²² Peter T. Murphy, in his article “Fool’s Gold: The Highland Treasures of Macpherson’s *Ossian*,” explains that “At the beginning of the eighteenth-century, the Gaelic-speaking people of Northern Scotland were a mystery to the rest of the population of the island,” but by the end of

irregularity appears in its composition; the expression is warlike
and melancholy, and approaches even to the terrible. (*Essays* 186)

Macpherson's Ossian poems subvert the notion of an uncivilized, barbarous sublimity governing the character and art of Highlanders. Their heroes are often overcome by nostalgia and sentiment, and moved to compassionate action in battle. Adam Potkay has recently attributed this tendency to a "feminization" of Fingal and his men, achieved through the "softening remembrance" of women (201). "Macpherson," Potkay argues, "realizes his own ideal of a softer man by feminizing male heroes" (203). I would argue that these notions of civility, politeness and sensibility are linked, not to the remembrance of women, but rather to the regional character that developed out of the potent mix of the Celtic spirit shaped by the Highland landscape. The same terrain that James Beattie describes as provoking "melancholy" in the character of Highlanders is transformed into a positive nostalgia in the poems, as it functions as a cogent marker of group identity. Thus, the Highlanders' relationship to their landscape promotes sensibility and moral action. In this way, the poems turn the ideology of landscape in on itself and present it as a benevolent social force. It is the Irish hero, not the Scottish, who is described as "dark," "gloomy," "terrible," with a

the century "they were a different kind of mystery: a culture whose strange ways were a subject of great curiosity – mystery made into cultural commodity. . . ."

“heart of rock” (60). The Danes and the Irish are both described as “autumn’s dark storms” (59). Oscar’s bravery in war and his benevolence in victory is inspired by his surroundings: “O Oscar!” Fingal advises his son as he goes into battle, “Be thou a stream of many tides against the foes of thy people; but like the gale that moves the grass to those who ask thine aid” (77). Fingal and his followers are praised for the mercy they show in battle, while their opponents, the Danes, lack the sensibility so prized in the eighteenth century. As one reviewer comments: “Fingal is moderate and gentle; Swaran, proud and insolent; the Scot is sentimental; the Dane ferocious; the king of Morven shines like the genial sun; the Lord of Lochlin glares like a baleful comet” (*The Critical Review* 13: 52). The Celtic heroes of *Ossian* are “civilized” in part because of—not in spite of—the landscape. The sublimity of the Highlands is not, as Burke suggests, an influence that evokes only the harsher emotions, but rather cultivates compassion and sensibility.

The Legacy of the Ossian Project

In this chapter I have traced the dominant themes of cultural identity that are developed in the Ossian project. By celebrating the historical preservation of political and religious freedoms in Highland society, the Ossian publications counter the prevailing English notion of “Gothic” liberty that was fuelling British

nationalism. Unwilling to submit to stereotypes of the barbarity and savagery of Highland culture, Macpherson and Blair argue for the civility and integrity of the Gaelic tradition and language. By emphasizing the geographic specificity of a British identity rooted in Highland culture, the Ossian project refuses to allow the Highlands to be incorporated as an inferior culture in a metropolis-based British nation; indeed, the project demands that the British patriotism amalgamating itself through an homogenizing vision of “Gothic” liberty fight for its claim to Celtic and Druidic lore. Macpherson’s Ossianic vision forces subsequent antiquarian works to demarcate their Gothic turf. In defending their models of Britishness, critics such as Johnson are forced to clarify and retrench how they link civility, language, and progress in a way that effectively defuses the threat the Ossian project mounted. In this way, the success of *Ossian* influenced both how Britain’s literary past was to be reconceptualized, and the path eighteenth-century literary criticism was going to take.

In the following chapters I will be probing the various medieval collections that were produced in the wake of the Ossian publications. These collections were either direct responses to, or indirect alternatives to, the blueprint of British identity laid out by Macpherson and Blair. Each of the collections I will be discussing – Evan Evans’s *Some Specimens*, Thomas Percy’s

Reliques, Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, and Thomas Chatterton's Rowley poems – espouses a different centre around which to build a sense of Britishness; however, these projects all grapple with the issues of liberty, civility, and geography raised in this chapter. *Ossian* functions as the standard against which to measure subsequent efforts to create more “authentic” versions of Britain's literary past. Evan Evans, for example, striving to make his collection look as “truthful” as possible in comparison to Macpherson, focussed his efforts on highlighting how the level of civilization in Wales had fostered a more venerable poetic tradition than elsewhere in Britain. Thomas Percy went to great lengths to redefine the Gothic tradition and its legacy as superior to that of the Highland Celts. Chatterton's Rowley poems are created using similar strategies to Macpherson's publications; however, because they make claims for Saxon poetry, the public treated them much differently. The *Ossian* project then, sets off a chain reaction that ultimately leads to various reconceptualizations of Britain's “original” identities, and ultimately influences not only the complexion of British nationalism at the end of the eighteenth century, but also the dominant standards of literary criticism.

Chapter 2:

The 'Right Man' in Wales

In 1763, three years after the momentous *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* was published, Richard Morris wrote to his brother Lewis that “Macpherson with his Galic poetry has set all the English antiquarians agog after the Welsh, in hopes of finding something equal to it” (*Letters*, II:537).¹ The Morris brothers—Richard, Lewis, and William—were leaders of the Welsh literary revival in the mid-eighteenth century. In the above comment, Richard mocks the zealotry of the English search for works rivalling Ossian in Wales. Similarly, William Morris commented on the irony that Highland poetry would increase the English interest in the Welsh poetic tradition, marvelling “that the grain of irritation of just one measly Scotchman” would draw English attention to the works of the sixth-century poet Taliesin (*Letters*, II:558).² Despite the derisive tone of these remarks, however, the Welsh literary revival had much to gain from this renewed interest in Welsh manuscripts. Indeed, Macpherson, the “measly Scotchman” whose Ossian poems called for a rewriting of British literary and national history, disrupted what the English literati saw as the hierarchy of

¹ Translated in Charlotte Johnston, “Evan Evans: Dissertation De Bardis.”

relationships among British medieval identities. The success of the Ossian poems prompted the English to look to the only manuscripts of comparable ancientness to which they felt they had legitimate claim: those of the Welsh. English literary heavyweights Thomas Percy and Samuel Johnson spearheaded the hunt for a Welsh equal to Ossian, and eventually encouraged the publication of Evan Evans's collection *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* in 1764. Evans, a Welshman highly skilled in translating ancient Welsh manuscripts, had become the focal point for English interests in medieval Welsh poetry. Although Percy and Johnson were attempting to oversee Evans' project in order to defuse the threat of the Ossian publications, however, *Some Specimens* also provided an opportunity for Welsh nationalists to showcase their national treasures. This publication of medieval Welsh poetry had the potential not only, as William Morris raved, to "show the difference between Briton and Scot," but also it could make claims for the superiority of the Britons in Wales over the Saxons in England (4 May 1763 II.557).³

This chapter, then, will examine *Some Specimens* as a site where cultural appropriation, propagation, and prejudice competed in efforts to strike a blow for a particular version of British history. In Percy and Johnson's involvement in

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

the publication of Evans' translations, one can examine the careful strategizing that took place on the part of the English to produce a rival to Ossian. Percy's search for the "right man" to translate Welsh materials demonstrates to what extent he was trying to deliberately fashion a version of literary history that endorsed English hierarchy in Britain. Evan Evans, in turn, negotiated the opportunity this English interest provided by using his contact with Percy to maximize the potential exposure for his publication. At the same time, however, Evans resisted English attempts to manipulate the tenor of his project, and instead forefronted his Welsh nationalist agenda in the finished version of *Some Specimens*. A third player in this chapter is Thomas Gray, whose appropriation of Welsh material in his odes circumvents Percy and Johnson's search for the "right man" to provide authentic Welsh materials, and instead incorporates Welsh poetry and history directly into his own work. Using Evans' materials before they went to press, Gray presents the English reading public with Welsh sources that have been fictionalized or adapted to suit English tastes. The reception of Gray's odes and Evans' *Some Specimens* reveals how the nationalist interests around these two projects are absorbed, translated, and manufactured into critical language and opinion.

Why Wales?: English Identity and the "Real" Britons

Before looking at the case of Evan Evans, it is worth discussing why the English literati would look to Wales for an answer to *Ossian*. Perhaps the most obvious conclusion is that Wales could claim the most ancient written manuscripts in Britain, and therefore could authenticate a collection of ancient poetry in a way that Scotland's oral cultural heritage prohibited. But there are more complex reasons behind this move. Certainly, in terms of medieval identities, Wales and England were quite distinct, the Celts in Wales having the claim to being the preserve of the ancient Britons, and the English having developed from the race of Saxon "intruders." However, the relationship between the English and the Welsh was much less antagonistic than that of the English and their Celtic neighbours to the north. As Linda Colley explains, "English nationalists were much less repelled by their union with Wales, partly because this connexion was so much older, but primarily because the Welsh seemed so much less threatening than the more numerous and military-minded Scots" (13). The colonization of Wales was secure: the English had officially subdued Wales in the sixteenth century after hundreds of years of invasions, and its small population kept it from posing any real threat to English rule. Ironically, however, because of their subservience to an English yoke, the Welsh could be celebrated by the English for their love of liberty. A Wilkite journalist

remarked that “The Welsh and the Scotch, who inhabit the remote ends of this kingdom are very opposite in their principles. The former are hot, generous, and great lovers of liberty. The latter violent and tyrannical” (*Middlesex Journal*, 29 April 1769). Wales was mentioned in conjunction with England as the stronghold of British liberty. Exemplified best in Thomson’s “Rule Britannia,” the resounding chorus – “Britons never will be slaves” – in a deeply ironic sense referred not only to the ancient Britons, but to their Saxon colonizers as well. This inconsistency – Wales’s thwarted independence and their inborn love of liberty – was accommodated by an English version of Welsh history.

English readings of Welsh history forefronted the notion that the Welsh spirit of liberty had been beneficially tempered by the security of the “Gothic” style of government. Although the Britons “lost their Liberty [to the Saxons], after having bravely maintained it for above eight hundred years,” Isaac Kimber’s *History of England* (1768) explained, they ultimately benefitted from being conquered because “the English permitted them to become one Nation with their conquerors” and the Welsh were able to thrive under “the virtues of the Ancient Constitution” (139). Reverend William Warrington explained in his *History of Wales* (1788) that this conquest ensured the “wild and precarious liberty” of the Welsh nation was “succeeded by a freedom. . . secured by equal

and fixed laws" (II, 345-346). The English were able to justify their colonization of Wales, then, by arguing that their nation was spreading the political freedoms enjoyed by their Gothic ancestors. Although the ancient Britons were thought to embody a spirit of liberty antithetical to the tyranny of, for example, the Normans, many Englishmen argued that their liberty also took an anarchic, unfettered form, that needed to be tempered by the true spirit of liberty embodied in the Gothic constitution. The Normans and the Britons represented two undesirable extremes, while the English, because of the ancient constitution inherited from their Saxon forbearers, were able to sustain a controlled version of liberty through mixed government.

Armed with this version of events, the English had increasingly absorbed Welsh history as a structure for legitimizing English religious and political institutions. Prys Morgan has pointed out that the eighteenth-century vision of Welsh history consisted of three main themes that the English drew upon: the notion that the Welsh were the original people of the British Isles, that the Welsh were the founders of Christianity in Britain, and that the native princes and kings of Wales could be traced in a line back to Brutus, whose family had come from Troy.⁴ These themes provided the English with fodder for their own national myths. By exploiting their colonial relationship with Wales, the English had

transformed the British-Welsh hero King Arthur into an English hero. In 1485, Henry VII had claimed to be descended from the seventh-century Welsh prince Cadwaladr, who had abdicated his throne; accordingly, Henry claimed he was restoring “liberty” to a nation tyrannized by Saxon and Norman misrule. He even named his eldest son “Arthur.” During the Reformation, the Anglican Church traced its roots to the early British Church, which had been overcome by the Norman yoke and subjected to Roman popery. St. David, they argued, who was the most famous saint of the early British church, “could be taken as a permanent reminder that the Church in England and Wales could claim an ancestry independent of papal Rome” (Pittock 202). By the eighteenth century, then, the English had become quite comfortable with thinking about the Welsh as an established and distinguished part of the English nation. Embracing Wales as part of England’s past gave the English a sense of embodying “native” Britishness.

Indeed, the Welsh past, with its associations with Druidic learning and Celtic liberty, was a touchstone for much of the English nationalist poetry of the early eighteenth century. The Welsh offered the English a rich heritage from which to cultivate images of the newly-formed Britain. The past of the ancient Britons, with its Druidical legacy and fantastic histories, supplied a wealth of

⁴ See Prys Morgan, “Merrie Wales and Its Passing.” 13- 39.

imagery for the construction of a national mythology which was lacking in the Saxon past; as well, because of the ancient Britons' association with the Roman empire, and their claim in Monmouth's *History* that Brutus founded ancient Britain, the English could harness the cultural capital of Rome to a neo-classical vision of England. In this way, Wales and the Britons could be adapted to promote both Gothic liberty and neo-classicism. Works like Thomson's "Rule Britannia" and *Liberty*, or Mallet's *King Alfred*, drew upon the strength of both traditions to develop their nationalist ideologies.

Why Not Wales: Welsh Nationalism and Resistance

Most Welshmen could only view such fabrications of British identity and history ironically. From their perspective, there were unyielding cultural differences between the Welsh and the English that stemmed from their different ethnic heritages. As Linda Colley points out, in 1751 a Welshman claimed that his poorer countrymen knew "no other name for Englishmen at this day, than *saison*, or Saxon" (13). The distinction between Saxon and Briton was sustained among Welsh poets. In 1690, for example an anonymous Welsh poet wrote about the difference in character between these two groups:

The guile and softness of the Saxon race

In gallant Briton's soul had never place;

Strong as his rocks and in his language pure,

In his own innocence and truth secure:

Such is the bold, the noble mountaineer,

As void of treason as he is of fear. ("On the Welsh," ca. 1690)

Just as Macpherson's publications championed the purity of Highland culture, so did Welsh nationalists highlight their ability to resist foreign invasion, and their status as the original inhabitants of Britain. The connection between landscape and character in the above poem – the "strong" rocks and "pure" language – are contrasted with the "softness" and "guile" of the Saxons, who are tied to no landscape, but rather are foreigners in Britain.

Welsh animosity towards the Saxons had a long-lived tradition. By the thirteenth century, Wales had endured roughly nine hundred years of battling English attempts to control their country, and the relationship between the two nations had been scarred by colonial practices. Wales had been left vulnerable after the Roman withdrawal from Wales in the early 400s. Originally settled by Celts, Wales had been under Roman control for over three hundred years, during which time the Romans built walls, roads and cities throughout their country. Upon the Romans' departure, Angles, Jutes and Saxons attempted to gain control of Wales. They had varying degrees of success, but ultimately the Welsh resisted

full invasion until the thirteenth century. Part of Wales' ability to resist foreign attacks for so long rested on the centralization of their defence under one of the last kings of the British line. Although the country was split into various regions controlled by chieftains, by the 1200s a large part of Wales was under the control of Llewelyn the Great. By 1267 Llewelyn II, his grandson, had been acknowledged as the Prince of Wales by King Henry III. When Henry III's son, Edward I, took the throne, the relationship between England and Wales disintegrated and Edward I began his campaigns against the Welsh. His brutal treatment of the Welsh was effective, and by 1284, Edward I issued the Statute of Rhuddlan, which placed Welsh lands directly under English control. This control continued, with the exception of Owen Glendower's (*Owain Glyn Dwr's*) successful revolt from 1404 to 1410, until the sixteenth century. In 1536, England and Wales were united as one country, in a move that was intended to efface Wales as an entity: Welsh law was abolished, English was made the official language of Wales, and monoglot native-speaking Welshmen were denied the right to "have or enjoy any manner of office or fees within this realm" (72).

Despite these laws, the Welsh language survived. Because Henry VIII wanted the Welsh to become Protestants, and so few Welsh understood English, the parliamentary decision was made to print a Bible and Common Prayer book

in the Welsh language. They did so in 1563, which was momentous for the Welsh language. While this move Protestantized Wales, it also helped revive Welsh national consciousness. So, while Wales was legally unified with England, overall, its linguistic practices continued to be distinct. There were some wealthier Welsh families who, upon the Act of Union, began to seek preferment in English circles, and by the eighteenth century the increasingly gentrified population of Wales had become more and more anglicized. Moreover, the prevalence of clergymen who could speak only English in overwhelmingly monoglot Welsh-speaking parishes suggested that, in terms of linguistic control, English was being increasingly imposed upon Welsh-speaking natives. Despite this trend, unlike in the Highlands, three out of four inhabitants of Wales still spoke Welsh throughout the eighteenth and well into the late nineteenth century (Morgan, 20).

At the same time, the increased number of books published in Wales had been growing from 1660 to 1730, perpetuated by Lewis Morris, who set up the first printing press in North Wales for the publication of Welsh books. These publications helped to crystallize an indigenous notion of "Welshness" that bolstered national sentiment. Newly-formed interest groups such as "The Society of Ancient Britons" (est. 1715) and "The Honourable Society of

Cymmrodorion" (est. 1751) fostered research into Welsh history. The native pride in Welsh history was potent. Despite years of English rule and the anglicization of their nation, the Welsh could still boast of their Celtic roots and their Roman heritage, and often positioned themselves against the savage tribes that had populated the rest of England and Scotland. The brutal behaviour of Edward I in his colonization of Wales, and the unlettered culture of the Highland Scots, were particular targets of criticism.

When it came to the study of ancient Welsh poetry; however, the situation was grim. Welsh literary studies were in unprecedented decline during the eighteenth century, after having steadily deteriorated since the prohibitive language laws of 1536. When Evan Evans was putting together his poetical collection, the Welsh bardic culture had declined almost to the point of extinction. Higher education centred around the English institutions of Cambridge and Oxford. Much ancient Welsh poetry was in risk of being lost forever because so few people had the ability to translate Welsh in its medieval forms. Already, the poetry of Taliesin, a bard believed to have existed in the sixth century, was in large part indecipherable. The Morris brothers, Evan Evans, and Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, a Welshman with a vast private library, had been striving to revitalize the study of ancient Welsh poetry, but it was

instead the “grain of irritation of just one measly Scotchman” that provided the extra stimulus needed to energize the rehabilitation of the “pearls” of Welsh literary history for the reading public.

The English Search for “The Right Man”

When Thomas Percy embarked on his pursuit for a Welsh rival to Ossian, he went in search of the “right man” to help him. The complexities of the relationship between England and Wales meant that their colonial history needed to be framed carefully if the English were going to capitalize on the wealth and ancientness of Welsh manuscripts. For a collection of Welsh poetry to mount a successful English challenge to *Ossian*, the differences between England and Wales needed to be minimized. Percy initially sought out Rice Williams, an anglicized Welshman studying at Cambridge, to help him put together a compilation of Welsh poetry. Williams did not believe Macpherson’s Ossianic translations were authentic and was eager to help Percy put together a Welsh collection to challenge them. In a letter to Percy in 1761, he writes:

Some Specimens of your Erse fragments I have perused. I am inclined to believe the Scot Collector has racked his brains in order for a *fiat mixtura* of his own invention with the originals. I make no doubt but the welsh poetic genius, if properly ushered on the stage,

would make a much better appearance than any of the pigmy race of the Caledonian muses. But to clear the way to its dark retreat, to make it ascend the english theatre with the same Spirit, Strength, grace and dignity it used to climb the famed *Penplimhimmon* requires the united efforts of a Legion of welsh Bards and english Poets. (12 March, 1761, *Percy Letters*, V:139)

Williams' awareness of the need for Welsh poetry to be "properly ushered" onto an English stage suggests his deliberate decision to collude with the English in order to defeat the "pigmy race of the Caledonian muses." Bigotry against the Scots helped form the bond between Williams and Percy. Thus, the "Legion of welsh bards and english Poets" was quickly formed between the two men. They initially worked together to collect Welsh proverbs; unfortunately, Williams was not proficient enough in the ancient Welsh language to translate poetry. Indeed, were it not for the declined state of the study of ancient Welsh literature, Evan Evans's help might never have been sought by Percy. With the need for someone to translate ancient Welsh manuscripts, however, the search for the "right man" continued.

Evan Evans, a Welshman who had struggled financially to study for a short time at Oxford and then returned to Wales to serve as a clergyman, was

soon identified as the “right man.” Evans had a reputation as a gifted poet and a knowledgeable antiquarian. Although he came from an impoverished background, he strove to make inroads as a scholar. Dubbed by Aneirin Lewis as “the greatest Welsh scholar of his time,” in his leisure time Evans was undertaking the translation of the many neglected Welsh manuscripts housed in private libraries around Wales (*Percy Letters*, xxxiii). Aided by his connections with such eminent Welsh antiquarians as Sir Watkin Williams Wynn and the Morris brothers, Evans was able to access numerous important manuscripts. Although Evans’ fierce Welsh nationalism should have perhaps been a warning to Percy and Williams that he might be resistant to their English agenda, the small number of scholars able to translate Welsh manuscripts limited their options. A spirited fighter in the cause to revitalize Welsh studies, Evan Evans, also known as Prydydd Hir, or the “tall poet,” became the focal point for English efforts to champion ancient Welsh poetry against Ossian.

Williams and Percy entered into what could be described as a covert mission to enlist Evans’ help for their project. Williams wrote to Percy in July 1761 about his first contact with Evans:

While in Wales I have collected about 20 proverbs which are not in my [Richards] Dictionary, and have engaged an old Revd Proficient

in Welsh, to translate into english all Richard's proverbs, but he has sent me none yet. Evans is the right man for us; You have my honour not to hint our scheme to him, but with your leave, I think I ought to let him into the secret, he may furnish us with necessary explanatory notes; and with as much british poetry as you please, *in futurum . . .* (*Percy Letters*, V:153-4)

The conspiratorial tone of Williams's letter, his mention of the "secret" plan to publish a collection of Welsh proverbs, and his reference to Evans as "the right man," suggests the level of awareness Percy and Williams had regarding the delicate maneuvering necessary to meet their agenda. Upon deciding on Evans, Percy began his careful correspondence with him.

In his first letter to Evans, written days after Williams identified him, Percy never mentions his own plan to publish a collection of ancient Welsh writings; rather, he encourages Evans to put together a select collection of his translations and "give them to the world" (*Percy Letters*, V: 2). His means of forging an alliance with Evans is shrewd. He attempts to convince Evans to publish a collection of Welsh poetry to bolster his nation's reputation, contrasting the lack of Welsh interest in national antiquities to that of the Scots who

are everywhere recommending the antiquities of their country to public notice, vindicating it's history, setting off it's poetry, and by constant attention to their grand national concern have prevailed so far as to have the Dialect⁵ ["broken jargon" deleted] they speak to be considered as the most proper language for our pastoral poetry.

[sic] (*Percy Letters*, V:2)

By playing Welsh patriotism against the Scottish pride in national history and literature, Percy appeals to Evans' concern with rehabilitating his nation's legacy. He then offers to use his "credit with the Booksellers, and with Mr. Dodsley in particular" to help get some of Evans's translations of Welsh poetry to the press (*Percy Letters*, V: 3). Nowhere in this letter does Percy mention his personal interest in having a collection of Welsh poetry published. Instead, Percy tempts Evans into forming an alliance with him by offering to facilitate his introduction to the London literati:

If you will favour me with a Line containing a more particular account of your labours . . . I will . . . communicate them to several eminent *Literati* of my acquaintance, and to mention one in

⁵ The original term Percy had used in the letter was "broken jargon," which he ended up deleting and replacing with "Dialect." Perhaps, remembering that Gaelic and Welsh derived from the same "broken jargon," he chose to use the word "Dialect" instead, suggesting that the Gaelic language had altered significantly from the original Celtic.

particular, Mr. Johnson, the Author of the *Rambler, Dictionary, &c.*, who will, I am sure, be glad to recommend your work, and to give you any advice for the most advantageous disposal of it. (*Percy Letters*, V:4)

Johnson's appearance in this letter is telling. His later role in writing the preface to Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, and his attacks against the authenticity of Macpherson's *Fragments*, suggest that his mention here is more than incidental. Certainly, the offer to provide Evans with his services would have been attractive, and it is possible that Johnson had a role in encouraging Percy to write Evans. Only two months before, Johnson and Percy had held a "council of war" concerning Macpherson's Ossian publications and Percy's plan for his *Reliques*. Percy relates Johnson's wish to Evans that the Welshman "will be able to rescue from oblivion, whatever remains of ancient British genius can be recovered." In a letter of December 1764, Percy mentions how Johnson always asks about Evans and his progress, and hopes that he is receiving public encouragement. Johnson's role in the Ossian controversy has been well-documented; however his part in the production of *Some Specimens* has been overlooked. Johnson had a much more positive opinion of Wales than Scotland. He approved of the "enclosed and planted" landscape of Wales, which

contrasted sharply with the barren, uncultivated scenes he disparaged in Scotland. He speaks positively of a visit to Wales, saying that “instead of bleak and barren mountains, there were green and fertile ones; and that one of the castles in Wales would contain all the castles that he had seen in Scotland” (Boswell 568). Wales represented a pleasant reminder of England’s colonial success, and Johnson boasts that “the ruins yet remaining of some one of those [castles] which the English built in Wales, would supply materials” for all of the extant Highland castles (qtd. in Henson, 90). Many of these castles were erected by Edward I, and were thought by the English to represent the grandeur of his reign, and the dynamism and strength of the English people.⁶ Indeed, Johnson commented that “Wales is so little different from England that it offers nothing to the speculation of the traveller” (*Life*, ii, 284). Johnson obviously saw Wales as an established part of England, and as a nation whose historical treasures were England’s domain. His involvement in the Percy-Evans correspondence, if only as a shadowy figure encouraging Evans’s project, emphasizes how important the English literati felt it was to promote a Welsh answer to *Ossian*.

Percy, then, with Johnson’s endorsement, forged ahead with his plans to have Evans produce a volume of ancient Welsh poetry. He initially promised to

⁶ See John A. Vance, *Samuel Johnson and the Sense of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 27.

send Evans some specimens of his own work on Runic poetry in exchange for translations of manuscripts as a means of securing Welsh materials. However, although Evans was quick to provide his translations, Percy delayed his copies of Runic poetry until July 1762, perhaps to ensure that Evans was indeed the “right man.” Upon receiving samples of Evans’ translations, Percy offered his support to Evans in putting together a full collection:

Were you to endeavour to collect into a *Corpus* all the remains of your ancient Poetry and print it by a subscription begun among your own Countrymen, and warmly recommended by them to us it would certainly pay well, and be a very valuable present to the public. But then you ought to send forth a few select pieces into the world previous to such an undertaking, to bespeak the good opinion if mankind: and this, whenever you please to execute it, shall be attended with my warmest services. (*Percy Letters*, V:20)

The use of Percy’s services, of course, would ensure his participation in its production. His involvement was crucial to the successful deployment of a Welsh collection that would bolster England’s stature.

Indeed, much of Percy’s correspondence with Evans betrays an anxiety regarding the execution of Evans’ project. Perhaps unsure that he had found the

“right man,” Percy repeatedly gives unsolicited advice to Evans about the collection. A central concern of Percy’s is the publication’s potential to attract the attention of a large reading public. Macpherson’s *Ossian*, written in English in measured prose, had appealed to a wide variety of readers beyond antiquarians and literary scholars. Percy instructs Evans to publish a collection of Welsh poetry that will be similarly accessible. He suggests that Evans provide an English translation of his Welsh poems instead of, or in addition to, Evans’s proposed Latin one. “By this means your book,” he writes, “will take in all readers both the learned, and the superficial” (*Percy Letters*, V:20). Percy was obviously concerned that such a collection would reach the widest audience possible, and even more pointedly, that it should be accessible to an English reading public. Rice Williams had recommended Evans as “a very fit person to dress out your welsh odes agreeable to the taste of the English reader” (*Percy Letters*, 156), and Percy himself encourages Evans to cater to the English, counselling:

if you would not think it too great an innovation, I could wish you would accommodate some of your British names, somewhat more to our English pronunciation: This is what the Erse translator has done, and I think with great judgement. (*Percy Letters*, V: 32)

Percy's unmistakable concern here is that *Some Specimens* should equal *Fragments* in accessibility and readability.

Percy also cautions Evans to concentrate more on the poetry itself than the history it contains. Likely anxious lest the more distasteful aspects of England's colonial relationship to Wales be highlighted, Percy warns Evans to limit the historical detail of his collection to the necessary contextual information:

Images, their strong paintings, their curious display of ancient manners; I defy the most torpid reader not to be animated and affected; and then we are content to make some inquiry after the history of these Savage Heroes, that we may understand the songs of which they are the subjects. (*Percy Letters*, V: 17)

Urging Evans to keep national distinctions secondary, Percy claims that there is no need to be concerned about the details of Wales' history with England:

Excuse me, if I think the recovery of particular Facts from oblivion, any farther than they contribute to throw light on compositions: not of half so much consequence to the world as to recover the Compositions themselves. Your nation and ours is now happily consolidated in one firm indissoluble mass, and it is of very little importance, whether *Llewellen* or *Edward* had the advantage in such

a particular encounter, at least very few (even learned and inquisitive) readers will interest themselves in such an inquiry.

(*Percy Letters*, V: 16)

Percy's vision of England and Wales as "one firm indissoluble mass" attempts to efface one of the most contentious aspects of the history of Welsh-English relations. In particular, his suggestion that it was of little importance "whether *Llewellen* or *Edward* had the advantage in such a particular encounter" is a central concern for Welsh nationalists, who saw Edward I as a symbol of the barbarity and treachery of the English. Percy, fearing such a version of history in Evans' collection, attempts to dissuade Evans from taking such an approach.

Evans, however, was not predisposed to obey Percy's directions. In a letter to Rice Williams, written in the sympathetic tone of one Welsh nationalist to another, he laments the contemporary lack of regard for Welsh history:

Now seeing that our poetry and antiquities have been so undeservedly disregarded by our own countrymen, tis no wonder that strangers have been so rude to us as to deny and call into question all our antient monuments, even some which our attested by the contemporary bards themselves. -I have made it my business for some years past to transcribe some of our old MSS.

that regard history in order in time (if God give me the life and health) to contradict our disingenuous adversaries, who as they know nothing to the purpose of the matter, peremptorily condemn our histories as fabulous and fictitious. (9)

Williams, of course, was not as sympathetic as Evans assumed. Upon receiving this letter, he wrote to Percy in August 1761 that Evans was “too eager on the wrong scent for our present purpose” and was “in some respects too sanguine” (*Percy Letters*, V:160). Although Williams felt that despite this Evans could give “a full view of the old British Bards,” he remarked to Percy, “I have my doubts, whether his near, or your distant prospect of them will please most” (160-161). With no other men qualified or willing to translate Welsh manuscripts in their cause, however, Williams conceded that Evans would still be useful to them (*Percy Letters*, V:160). For his own part Evans, as we shall see, engaged in his own delicate maneuvering to benefit from Percy’s interest, while simultaneously developing his project according to a Welsh agenda.

The “Right Man” and the Welsh Agenda

Despite Percy’s efforts to nurse Evans’ collection through to publication, the Welsh antiquary remained vague about his publication plans during their correspondence. Evans likely did not trust Percy’s interest in his work. He

would have become suspicious when Williams, despite his promises to Percy to keep the “secret” of their Welsh publication from Evans, mentions in his letter accompanying Percy’s introductory missive that he and Percy have made a “secret. . . resolution to collect as many welsh proverbs” as possible (*Percy Letters*, V: 157). Percy’s silence regarding this matter, then, would likely have made Evans wary. This wariness would have been compounded when he received a letter from Percy which introduced his plan to put together his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, and asked Evans “please to not drop the least hint of it to” Williams because Percy was planning “to keep it a profound secret from him” until its publication (*Percy Letters*, V: 25). When Percy requested any translations of Welsh Interludes Evans might have, the Welshman refused, saying they “deserve only the attention of clowns and rustics” (*Percy Letters*, V: 44). Evans likely felt he should protect the reputation of Welsh poetry, especially from an Englishman such as Percy. Indeed, throughout their correspondence, Evans gives Percy only enough translations to keep him interested in his project, without providing him with his larger publication plans. When Evans published his *Specimens of Ancient Poetry* in 1764, he did so without using Percy as a middle man, even though Percy had requested to see the manuscripts before they went to press. Overall,

Evans was able to shrewdly capitalize on Percy's offers of help, without shaping his final product according to Percy's desires.

That is not to say that Evans did not take any advice from Percy. Rather, he followed Percy's suggestion to provide English translations for his Welsh originals in order to make his book more marketable. Edward D. Snyder claims that Evans "saw the necessity of putting Welsh bards within the reach of the English public" (25). However, Evans decided to keep his critical dissertation on the ancient Welsh bards, "Dissertatio De Bardis," in its Latin original. Charlotte Johnston suggests Evans did so because he was interested in attracting European scholars, but I propose that his decision also turned on the fact that, given Wales' history as the Roman province of Britain, Latin had functioned as an important mark of group identity, distinguishing the Welsh from the illiterate Saxons, Danes and Irish. This distinction, then, was underscored in Evans' use of Latin in his "Dissertatio." In his correspondence with Percy, he is particularly keen to differentiate between the English and Welsh traditions. "As to the queries you sent me with regard to Ballads," he writes in response to one of Percy's inquiries about Welsh poetry, "we have none of the same nature with what the English have of that kind" (*Percy Letters*, V: 25). Evans is persistent in his discrimination between the two traditions, and it is perhaps with some irony that he writes to

Percy, who supposedly changed the spelling of his name from the Welsh “Piercy” to the English “Percy” to align himself with the Northumberland Percys, “I understand you are still busy in making collections of your ancient poets, and I heartily wish you success. It is pity you are not a Welshman, for I assure you that you would find nobler game” (*Percy Letters*, V: 55).

The plan of *Some Specimens* clearly illustrates that Evans had Welsh, not English, national interests at heart when he put it together. While Percy had asked Evans to minimize the historical context of the poetry he collected, for Evans this is one of their most important aspects. “All our poetry is historical,” he claims, “which makes the works of the Bards not only valuable as poets, but historians” (82). Indeed, Evans decides to showcase the historical aspect of the poems. “Our Bards were cotemporary with the persons, whose actions they celebrate, and acted the part of historians as well as poets,” he explains in his project, “and in this light they were looked upon by the Greeks and the Romans that occasionally mention them” (25). Evans defended the integrity of his country and its antiquities. His claim that the British bards were historians as well as poets unavoidably ties into a heavily debated topic about Welsh history in the eighteenth century. The controversy over the authenticity of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* was fought on one side by Lewis Morris who, like other

Welshmen, thought Monmouth had used an authentic Welsh source to write his history, but had embellished it, and on the other side by English and Scottish antiquarians who thought it was entirely fabulous. In *Some Specimens*, Evans admits that some Welsh “history” is fictional, but staunchly supports Monmouth’s history.

More pointedly, Evans was keen to underscore the importance of the conflicts between Llewellyn and Edward I, using this pivotal historical moment to distinguish between the English and the Welsh. Many of the poems he chooses to include in his collection highlight this all-important period of Welsh resistance. In one of Evans’ translations celebrating a Welsh victory over the English, for example, an apostrophe to Llewellyn praises his valour: “Thou that feedeth the fowls of the air like Caeawg the hero, the valiant ruler of all Britain, the numerous forces of England tumble and wallow in the field before thee” (33). Llewellyn is described as causing “the Bryneigh [Saxons] to vomit blood” (40). One bard boasts, “no Englishman shall get one foot of thy country” (39). Llewellyn is celebrated as the leader of an imperial Wales, and one poem claims that “Constantine was not his equal in undergoing hardships” (18). Likened to an emperor of imperial Rome, Llewellyn leads a country with great potential to expand its dominion:

He is a prince with terrible looks who will conquer in foreign countries, as well as in Mon the mother of all Wales. His army has made it's way broad thro' the ocean, and filled the hills, promontories and dales. The blood flowed about their feet when the maimed warriors fought. In the battle of Coed Anea, thou, supporter of Bards, didst overthrow thy enemies. [sic] (35)

In Evans' selections, Llewelyn represents the ideal national leader. He is "the eagle amongst the nobles of Britain" (21). Under his leadership "Britain. . . [is] fearless of her enemies, [and] glories in being ruled by him" (24). He "defies his enemies from shore to shore" (24).

Moreover, in the poems Evans includes Llewelyn is often hailed for his generosity to the bards. One of the poems mentions the "gold and silver" which he dispensed to his bards. He is liberal with money because he "regardeth it not." He is compared to "brave Arthur" several times, and is tied to the Brutsmythology, being "a noble lion descended from the race of kings" (40). His beneficence is implicitly contrasted to Edward I's cruel treatment of the bards in one poem. The speaker, himself a bard, pays tribute to Llewelyn:

He is generous, the pillar of princes. I never return empty-handed from the North. My successful and glorious prince, I would not

exchange on any conditions. I have a renowned prince, who lays
 England waste, descended from noble ancestors. . . . Thou dragon
 of Arfon of resistless fury, with thy beautiful well-made steeds, no
 Englishman shall get one foot of thy country. There is no Cymro
 thy equal." (38-9)

The bards extol the "valour" of the Welsh warriors, making it their "common theme"; so, as with *Ossian*, the bards function as positive influences on the heroism of their society.

Evans himself highlights the very differences between Llewelyn and Edward I Percy cautioned him to minimize. For Evans, the distinction between the two leaders is indicative of the basic contrast between the Welsh and the English. Evans characterizes Edward I as the epitome of destructive barbarity, describing him acting "like a tyrant towards the Bards," and criticizing the "barbarous way" he treated prince Llewelyn and his brother David. He interprets Edward's behaviour as "a savage revenge"(88), and juxtaposes this with a description of the Welsh bards as defenders of liberty against the tyranny of Edward I and "the treacherous English." He explains that "the Bards were to the Welsh what the orators had been to the Athenians, and these Philip of Macedon wanted to be handed over to him, so that he could reduce Greece to

slavery" (88). These explanations undermine the notion of Gothic liberty espoused by the English much in the same way that Macpherson's *Ossian* does. They draw attention to the savagery of Edward I, who was often lauded by the English as the monarch who limited church control beyond religious matters, reaffirmed the Magna Carta, and formed the Model Parliament. Instead of bolstering an English version of liberty, the poems in Evans' collection celebrate a form of liberty intrinsic to the Welsh people.

Indeed, Evans explicitly excludes the English or Saxon people from the version of British liberty celebrated in his collection. In the preface to *Specimens*, Evans' national pride is evident: "I had long been convinced, that no nation in Europe possesses greater remains of antient and genuine pieces of this kind than the Welsh; and therefore was inclined, in honour of my country, to give a specimen of them in the English language" (*sic*, ii). In his "Dissertatio De Bardis" Evans clearly distinguishes between the relative "civility" of the Welsh and the illiterate pagan tribes peopling other areas of ancient Britain. Although admitting that Welsh bards "lived in times when all Europe was enveloped in slavery" (i), he excludes the Welsh from this charge. He lays the destruction of learning in the middle ages at the doorstep of the other tribes peopling Britain: "When the Picts, Scots, and Saxons laid waste the Kingdom of the British," he

explains, “they wrought untold destruction on the books and ancient records of our ancestors; so much so that the works of the Bards and the chroniclers of that age have become exceedingly rare” (77). Rather than elevating the English and the Welsh above the Highland Celts, Evans’s collection lumps the English and the Highland Celts together as barbarous, illiterate pagans, threatening the liberty of the civilized, literate Welsh.

Despite criticizing the Highland Celts alongside the Saxons, Evans does not mount the kind of direct challenge to *Ossian* that Percy had hoped for. Evans is careful not to challenge the authenticity of *Ossian* overtly, stating in the “Preface” to his collection that he “mean[s] not to set the following poems in competition” with *Ossian*, for, he says, “it is not my intention to enter into the dispute, which has arisen in relation to the antiquity of Ossian’s poems” (i-ii). That is not to say that Evans thought the poems were authentic; indeed, Evans shared Johnson’s view that it was unlikely that the Erse language would have changed less over the centuries than the Welsh, and that the Highland Celts would have preserved the Gaelic better than his own countrymen had preserved their own language.⁷ Evans was likely aware, however, that to enter into the

⁷ Certainly Evans was keen to distinguish among the Welsh and the Irish and Scottish in *Some Specimens*. He was adamant that the Celtic peoples in Ireland and Scotland were different than those in Wales. More specifically, he claimed they had not

dispute directly would hamper the potential marketability and popularity of his collection. His privately-voiced doubts about Macpherson's Ossianic publications are subdued into a passing insinuation in his preface.⁸ "As to the Genuineness of these poems," he begins,

I think there can be no doubt; but though we may vie with the Scottish nation in this particular, yet there is another point, in which we must yield to them undoubtedly. The language of their oldest poets, it seems, is still perfectly intelligible, which is by no means our case. (ii)

Johnson, referring to this passage, complained of the "credit" Evans gave "to the Pretensions of McPherson and his Erse Poetry," and Percy voiced similar

retained the purity of culture the Celts in Wales had. In a diatribe on this subject, reminiscent of Hugh Blair's preface to *Fragments*, Evans writes of this distinction:

For the Celtæ properly so called were the inhabitants of ancient Gaul, great Britain and Ireland, but are confined at this day within the narrow compass of Wales Bass Bretagne and Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland. But the two last are mixed with numerous colonies of other nations particularly the Catabrians from Spain, in so much that their language is very much corrupted. So that the Welsh and the Breton are the most pure dialects of the Celtic in this day extant. (91-2)

However, Evans does not attempt to use this argument aggressively against Macpherson.

⁸ As Charlotte Johnson points out, Evan Evans and Richard and Lewis Morris had decided against the authenticity of Macpherson's *Ossian* because of their own difficulty with translating Welsh poetry written two centuries after Ossian supposedly wrote his verses. "Macpherson is a rogue sheep-stealer," Lewis Morris exclaimed in a letter to his brother in 1763, "the whole affair is nothing but his own contrivance" (qtd. in Johnston, p. 62).

dismay.⁹ Evans's bone of contention, however, is with the colonizers, not the colonized, and he seems unwilling to let his collection be used as part of an English arsenal against the Scots. Evans' real goal in publishing a collection of Welsh poetry was not, as it was with Percy, to undermine the Ossian poems; rather, his concern was with promoting Welsh literature and history.

The Successes and Failures of *Some Specimens*

Although Evans was able to successfully resist Percy's English agenda in his creation of *Some Specimens*, the responses to his publication were likely, overall, a disappointment to him. For just as Percy's agenda had a built-in failure factor because he needed to rely on Evans, a Welsh nationalist, to provide England's response to Macpherson's Ossian poems, Evans faced the obstacle of trying to make his Welsh nationalist scheme palatable to a reading public that lay

⁹ In a letter to Evans, Percy explained that Johnson had been visiting him for a few months and had read Evans's collection with great attention. Dr. Johnson, Percy explains, is much pleased with your performance. . . . He hopes you will be able to rescue from oblivion, whatever remains of ancient British genius can be recovered, and thinks your labours deserve great encouragement. The only thing he blames in your book is the credit you have given at the beginning of it to the Pretensions of McPherson and his Erse Poetry: He and every penetrating Person I have ever conversed with look upon it, as almost all an imposition, and that of no very artful kind. . . . Thus his (McPherson's) assertion about the incorruptibility of the Erse Language, and its having received no alterations during a course of so many ages, is considered in the light it deserves, when all the world knows that there are hardly two Glens in the Highlands which speak the same dialect: and that often it happens that the inhabitants of two different sides of a mountain, hardly understand one another when they meet, so widely does their Erse differ: in short all the difference of dialect that prevails in any other language, (Welsh or

largely outside of Wales. English and Scottish readers could not help but be offended by some of the criticisms against their medieval forbearers. Evans' relatively neutral stance regarding *Ossian* allowed him some success among Scottish reviewers. An obviously pro-Ossian and pro-Scottish reviewer of *Some Specimens* gave Evans' publication a positive review, aligning it with Scotland's cause against "the English yoke." The "present neglect of the Welsh language," the reviewer writes, "is reproachful to English literature" because it stems from wrongful assertions that St. Augustine taught Saxons the use and knowledge of characters in writings, and that the Welsh and Irish learned of their use from the English (*The Critical Review*, Vol. 18, 81). This, the reviewer maintains, is responsible for the "obscurity and neglect" of Welsh poetic genius.

The reviewer is keen to point out, however, that some of the comments made in Evans' *Dissertatio* are unfair to the Scots. In particular, he points to the charge laid against them for destroying Welsh learning, and lays blame solely on the Saxons, cleverly aligning them with paganism and popery, while praising the relative autonomy of the Welsh church. "As to the Saxons," he explains,

They were declared enemies to the Welsh, because the latter were Christians, and the others at first were heathens, and then papists,

English for instance) prevails, as I am assured, by competent judges, in the Gallic Tongue. (95)

and consequently had a mortal antipathy to the Welsh, who disowned the power of the pope. But with regards to the Scots and Picts, we believe this author will have great difficulty to prove that they ever invaded Wales. (83)

The reviewer suggests a sense of fraternity, or at least neutrality, among the Celtic tribes of Britain, while pointing to the Saxons as intruders. He does distinguish between Ossian, who “describes nature, her tremendous scenes and appearances,” and the Welsh bards described in Evans’ “Dissertatio De Bardis,” who “apply themselves more to the description of men and manners” (84). He makes a much greater distinction, however, between the Gothic bards throughout Europe and the Celtic Welsh bards of the same age, pointing out that the Welsh poetry, unlike the Gothic, “betrays no expression or sentiment in them low, vulgar, and unpoetic” (87).

Other reviewers were not so positive. In part, Evans’ subject matter was off-putting to readers lacking pro-Welsh or anti-English sentiment, but also Evans’ translation practices lacked the inventiveness and imagination that had made Macpherson’s publications so attractive to readers. For Evans, the translation needed to be as accurate as possible. Macpherson, of course, had taken a different view. As Fiona Stafford has described in *The Sublime Savage*,

Macpherson saw his role as a translator to be restorative, not literal. Aspiring to restore the Ossian poems to their original form, he attempted to eliminate the mediating voice of the bard, the necessary medium of oral transmission. He employed his own judgment not only in piecing together fragments, but in bridging gaps within the pieces. Rather than supply bridges between gaps in the manuscript originals as Macpherson had done, however, Evans left the gaps as they were. "As to the translation," he explains, "I have endeavoured to render the sense of the Bards faithfully" (iv). He tries to present direct translations of the originals, unless he saw it as "absolutely necessary, on account of different phraseology and idiom of language" (iv). When Evans encounters parts of the texts he does not understand, rather than supplying bridges between segments, as Macpherson did, and Percy was later to do in *Reliques*, Evans preferred to make the gaps visible. "I have been obliged to leave blanks in some places," he admits, "where I did not understand the meaning in the original, as I had but one copy by me, which might be faulty" (v). Evans places a high value on manuscripts, urging other antiquarians to take on the cause of translating Welsh manuscripts which were being "suffered to rot in such libraries, where nobody is permitted to have access to them" (158).

Evans's straightforward technique, while allowing him to avoid charges of forgery, unfortunately made his collection less appealing to critics and the reading public. His emphasis on literal translation produced a collection that lacked the imaginative qualities of Macpherson's publications. While *Ossian* was shaped to appeal to an eighteenth-century taste for sublimity, sentiment, and natural descriptions, Evans's Welsh poems were translated verbatim. Accordingly, reviewers complained that "all we see in the specimens here given, are so many skeletons of poetry, without fresh blood or complexion" (*The Critical Review*, 71). In *The Monthly Review* a sympathetic reviewer apologized for the translations, warning that "the mere English Reader, who cannot relish the beauties of these poems in the original Welsh, will be tempted to under-rate their merit" (Vol. 31, 22). John Wilkes was not so delicate in his views, saying of *Some Specimens* that

No person but a thorough Welshman, can find the least pleasure in the perusal of these remains of ancient bards of that country. The fire of that nation does not seem to have animated their poets, for nothing was ever more cold and prosaic than the pieces with which we are here presented. (*Contribution in Modern Philology*, No. 15. , 24-5.)

Wilkes went on to subvert the authenticity issue that was so prevalent in responses to *Ossian*, claiming, “We hope for the honour of this country, that the pieces are not genuine, for we would not that the great names of *Taliesin*, *Llydgadgwy*r *Gwilym Ddu*, shou’d quite fall into ridicule” (25).

Eighteenth-century taste favoured Macpherson’s rather than Evans’ method; indeed, the notion of Gothic liberty feeding an English-based version of Britishness fuelled the notion of “liberal” translation. Samuel Johnson writes in *The Idler* that English translations of foreign works were initially unflinching, and disappointingly, literal; however, during the age of Elizabeth it was discovered “that greater liberty was necessary to elegance, and that elegance was necessary to general reception” (No. 69, 1759: 74). This approach lapsed for a period, but was reinstated upon the Restoration, where “poets shook off their constraint, and considered translation as no longer confined to servile closeness” (74). Johnson asserts that these “paraphrastic liberties have been almost universally admitted” (75). Johnson aligns liberty and elegance in literature with periods where a Protestant government reigned that was imbued with the spirit of Gothic liberty. In this sense, then, Evans’ literal translation practices can be seen as antithetical to the spirit of liberty that purportedly characterizes British genius.

Because of these literal translation practices, the Welsh epic, *The Gododdin*, that Evans brings to light in *Some Specimens*, does not receive the amount of attention it might have had it been presented in the same manner as *Fingal* or *Temora*. *The Gododdin* was not produced in full form in *Some Specimens*; instead, it was quoted at length in the *Dissertatio De Bardis*. The epic was a heroic poem attributed to the sixth-century poet Aneurin Gwawdrydd. Lewis Morris extolled the importance of Evans' discovery of the epic, referring to it as "equal at least to the Illiad, Aenead, or Paradise Lost" (5 August 1758 *A/L* I. 349). Unfortunately, Evans had great difficulty translating the epic, admitting to Percy that he did not "absolutely understand above 3 parts in four of the Works of Aneurin Gwawdrydd" (*Percy Letters*, V: 159). He was also unable to look at different manuscripts to compare copies. As a result, he decided only to print ten stanzas from the *Gododdin*. He inserted them with their literal Latin prose translations into his "Dissertatio," but made no effort to link the passages or explain the poem as a whole. Expectations for the epic were great, the reviewer from the *Critical Review* claiming that "from the specimens of his poetry given to us by Dr. Evans . . . he seems to have been the Virgil, as Ossian was the Homer, of Gaelic poetry" (83). In other words, the *Gododdin* could potentially fulfill the drive for a national epic that was taking place throughout the eighteenth century.

Evans refused, however, to stray from a direct translation of Welsh originals, and so a complete version of the epic was not produced until after his death.

In comparison to the widespread enthusiasm of Macpherson's *Fragments*, and the highly-publicized controversy over *Fingal* and *Temora*, *Some Specimens* did not attract as much attention as Evans and the Morris brothers surely hoped. Evans' reliance on the literal translation of his materials was partly responsible for this. Just as important, however, was that the materials themselves were used by Evans to bolster the reputation of the Welsh over other medieval inhabitants of Britain. Although the Scottish found enough anti-English sentiment in the collection to give their qualified support to it, the English were markedly aloof in their reception of *Some Specimens*, if not openly scathing, as was the case with Wilkes. As well, an important factor in the reception of Evans' work was surely that there were no prominent Welsh nationalists to champion its cause in English or Scottish literary circles. While the authenticity and importance of the Ossian poems were upheld by figures with clout in London, such as Hugh Blair, David Hume, David Dalrymple and Tobias Smollett, *Some Specimens* could not hope for much support outside of Wales, and even that support was minimal given its small population and limited number of Welsh scholars.

Thomas Gray and the English "Bard"

The eventual success of Thomas Gray's "The Bard" and his "Welsh" odes stands in interesting contrast to Evans' inability to garner much support for *Some Specimens*. By examining the case of "The Bard" and Gray's other Welsh odes, it becomes persuasively clear that indeed it was not entirely that Evans' raw material was unappealing to the British reading public, but rather, his method of presenting his materials to the public was distasteful to many. In 1757, Gray had published a collection of odes, among which was the pindaric ode "The Bard," a piece which took as its inspiration the tradition of the slaying of the Welsh bards by Edward I in 1284. Gray had read about this event in a manuscript source quoted in Carte's *History of England*, and used it as the basis on which to create the voice of a lone surviving bard, lamenting the fate of his fellow countrymen. Gray's dramatization of this initially received a cool reception, mainly because of a general resistance to its subject matter. Critical responses to "The Bard" in England speak to a certain uneasiness with Gray's dramatization of Edward I's cruel practices. In Oliver Goldsmith's review of *Gray's Odes*, in the *Monthly Review* of September 1757, he praises the poems but regrets that they are "designed for those who have formed their taste by the models of antiquity" and are "unsuited. . . to our national character" because

their subject matter is unfamiliar. A later critic of Gray's, Percival Stockdale, writes in his *An Inquiry into the Nature, and Genuine Laws of Poetry* (1778), that Gray's preference for Fingal over Rousseau's "New Eloisa" betrays "a depravity of judgement approaching to insanity" and says *The Bard* is "too circumstantially historical," suggesting, as others had as well, that Edward I's massacre of the bards had never occurred (104).¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, in his controversial biography of Gray, picked up on this issue, arguing against the truthfulness of the massacre of the bards. Although he praised Gray for the conduct of his personal life, he was damning of his poetry, criticizing *The Bard* for its "apparent and unconquerable falsehood" (IV: 481). He elaborates:

To select a singular event, and swell it to a giant's bulk by fabulous appendages of spectres and predictions, has little difficulty, for he that forsakes the probable may always find the marvellous; and it has little use, we are affected only as we believe; we are improved only as we find something to imitated or declined. I do not see that *The Bard* promotes any truth, moral or political. (IV: 481-82)

¹⁰ Even Gray himself suggested after the publication of "The Bard" that perhaps the bards were stripped of their roles, not hung.

Gray's portrayal of Edward I seems to touch a raw nerve with Johnson. Always the staunch Englishman, his emphasis on the failure of "The Bard" to represent either a moral or historical truth betrays traces of his outrage against the Ossian poems.

Gray's focus on Edward I's barbarous slaying of the Welsh bards would indeed have been undesirable for those with English sympathies. Charles H. Hinnant has suggested that the initially cool reception of Gray's "The Bard" was influenced by prevailing historical attitudes at the time of its publication. Although the increasing popularity of the romantic imagination fed into "The Bard"'s success later in the eighteenth-century, at the time of its publication the "story of liberty" which fuelled English patriotism would have been resistant to the notion of Edward I as a tyrant.¹¹ Hinnant explains how most eighteenth-century views of Edward I's practices concurred with those of Hume, who said his conduct was "barbarous, though not absurd" (*Correspondence*, II: 18), and Goldsmith, who said his actions were "at that time not uncommon" (*Correspondence*, II: 209). Thomas Carte, Gray's source for the episode upon which "The Bard" is based, explained that Edward I was "styled by the *English* the *good king*" and was "one of the best, wisest, and the greatest princes, that ever

¹¹ See Hinnant, Charles H. "Changing Perceptions of the Past: The Reception of Thomas Gray's 'The Bard.'" *CLIO* III/3 1974.

filled the throne of *England*" (*Correspondence*, II: 301). Gray seems to have been aware that his depiction of Edward I would offend English readers, and so promised Horace Walpole in 1768 to add "certain little notes. . . just to tell the gentle reader, that Edward I was not Oliver Cromwell" (*Correspondence*, III: 1018).

Hinnant's argument can easily be extended to the reception of Evans's collection, for the subject matter he chose to deal with, despite Percy's warnings would have made his collection the subject of a similarly cold reception as Gray's "The Bard." Gray was ultimately able to achieve popularity with his poem, however, because, unlike Evans' reliance on the literal, he used an historical episode as aesthetic inspiration. Rather than claiming, as Evans did, that his poetry represented history *per se*, history serves merely as a background to an emotional scene. His approach to translation was free and imaginative, shunning the use of footnotes to contextualize his subject. "I do not love notes," he wrote to Walpole in July 1757, "They are signs of weakness and obscurity. If a thing cannot be understood without them, it had better not be understood at all" (*Correspondence*, II: 508). "The Bard" was to be appreciated less as an actual historical event, than as a poetically inspiring dramatic episode. Joseph Warton praised Gray for using the tradition of old bards and drawing inspiration from

Welsh landscape and legend.¹² Robert Potter, in *An Inquiry into Some Passages of Dr. Johnson's lives of the Poets* (1789),¹³ discusses Gray at length, praising the "poetic fictions" of *The Bard* (16-38). Even when Gray published "translations" of a manuscript version of Evans' "De Bardis Dissertatio" in 1760, under the titles "Triumphs of Owen," "Death of Hoel," "Caradoc," and "Conan," he strayed significantly from the originals. As Charlotte Johnston has pointed out, Gray added "beauties" to Evans's translations rather than simply reproducing them. A line such as "thou wast like fire, thunder, storm" becomes

As the flames devouring force;
As the whirlwind in its course;
As the thunder's fiery stroke
Glancing on the shiver'd oak. . .

Gray's use of Welsh history was more circumstantial than political, and while his popularity continued to grow after the successes of Macpherson's Ossian poems, Evans and his project quickly receded into the distant background. Gray's poetry heralded a new imaginative aesthetic, while Evans' efforts attempted to give voice to a history no-one outside of Wales wanted to hear. Richard Morris had actually warned Evans of the possibility of such a situation.

¹² See Warton's remarks in his *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1782) 2nd volume. London: J. Dodsley, pp. 24-5, 40-42, 289, 479, 481. 1782.

He cautioned Evans to maintain a tight grip on his authentic Welsh materials, advising him that perhaps he should not be so eager to show his “Dissertatio De Bardis” to Gray and others:

I wonder whether Mr. Gray and other Englishmen, who have seen your Essay about the ancient poets, may not rob you of the honour of interpreting them? You had better send them here to be published – and not let mere English or Scots strangers bring them to the birth.

(Additional Letters of the Morrisises, 262, Dec. 1760)

His fears proved well-grounded, for Gray published “The Bard” in 1757, and his “translations” from Evans’ “Dissertatio” in 1760. By the time *Some Specimens* was published in 1764, there were few who were interested by the kind of specimens Evans was offering. As Katie Trumpener has pointed out, Gray’s form of cultural appropriation “endangered the bardic tradition” by trying “to impersonate the bardic voice and to imitate bardic materials, without grasping their historical and cultural significance” (6). Despite initial criticisms of “The Bard,” the poem rapidly grew in popularity, and by the 1770s and 1780s, English tourists were travelling to Wales to view the hills above the river Conway that Gray described in his poem. Gray’s imaginative interpretation of Welsh history,

¹³ London: J. Dodsley, 16-38.

then, not only stood in for versions of the past produced by Welsh natives, it also became inextricable from the Welsh landscape.

Gray promoted a version of Welshness that, as Percy had hoped would be the case with *Some Specimens*, was non-threatening to a version of British nationalism that affirmed English superiority. Sam Smiles has posited that Gray “freed Celtic Britain from the exclusive concern of scholarship” and “was one of the most important stimuli to a more widespread public understanding of archaic Britain” (48). However, as I have argued, his depiction of “archaic Britain” was decidedly lacking in concrete historical conciseness and depended instead upon poetic licence. It is telling that it took dramatic adaptations of historical events and documents, rather than remnants of the actual past, to elicit enthusiasm for Welsh history from the British reading public. Edward Snyder explains that “the Celtic Revival was something definite; it was a real movement among English men of letters who were united by a common desire to infuse into English poetry the mythology, the history, and the literary treasures of the ancient Celts” (4). Snyder’s comment illuminates, perhaps unintentionally, the colonial spirit of the Celtic Revival. The English appropriation of the history of the Britons in Wales is perhaps embodied best in Gray’s project. He could, as Walpole suggested, equally be a “Welsh Gray” as much as a “Danish Gray,” and,

as Katie Trumpener has charged, he enacted a repetition of the cultural subjugation of the initial colonization of Britain.

Evan Evans and his Legacy: Beyond *Some Specimens*

What are we to make, then, of Evans' contribution to the struggles to define Britishness that were taking place in the literary debates of the 1760s and onwards? *Some Specimens*, a publication for which the likes of Percy and Johnson had such high hopes, did not "rival" the Ossian poems. Indeed, Evans' research, aside from providing Thomas Gray with fodder for his Welsh odes, did little to alter the literary landscape of Britain in the 1760s. But the strategies he used to create *Some Specimens*, and the tenor of his Welsh nationalism, are valuable indicators of the struggles for British identity being enacted during the later part of the eighteenth century. His nationalist endeavours after the publication of *Some Specimens* highlight some of the central concerns of Welsh nationalism at the end of the eighteenth century. He cannot perhaps be appreciated as a victorious leader who successfully cultivated Welsh national sentiment, but he certainly celebrated his nation's virtues, and, by doing so, lay the groundwork for further steps to be taken to articulate the uniqueness of Welsh culture.

Indeed, Evans himself adopted more direct methods to champion Wales and criticize England's colonial practices after the publication of *Some Specimens*.

He became extremely vocal about the domination of English-language services in Welsh-speaking parishes, and the language issue became a platform to call for a revival of the Welsh spirit of liberty. He wrote an essay criticizing Anglo-Welsh bishops in 1764 or 1765 entitled "The Grievances of the Principality of Wales in the Church," which he sent to Percy but was never able to publish. Nor did Percy offer help in such an undertaking, likely feeling that Evans' usefulness had come to an end. Evans visited St. David's in Pembrokeshire and was "surprised to find it [the divine service] performed in English in so remote a corner. I suppose our clergy think that the vulgar have no souls. . . ." ¹⁴ His resentment grew with time, and is expressed in the Welsh patriotism of his poem entitled "For the Love of Our Country" in 1772. In a letter to Sir Watkin Williams Wynn in 1776, he speaks of "the popish usage" of the Welsh people by English clergymen (*Percy Letters*, V: 177). In his 1776 collection of sermons, *Casgliad o Bregethau*, he attacks English bishops in Wales for preaching to Welsh parishes in English for "filthy lucre's sake" and points an accusing finger at English government.

Evans' writings on the use of English in Welsh churches did not help instigate any changes. The practice of giving services in English to Welsh-speaking parishioners continued. Murray G. H. Pittock cites the famous case of

¹⁴ Letter to Benjamin Davies on 18 June 1781, National Library of Wales MS. 5497.

Dr. Bowles, who in 1766 was appointed Rector of a Welsh parish where only five of his five-hundred parishioners spoke or understood English. His attorney argued that “Wales is a conquered country; it is proper to introduce the English language, and it is the duty of the bishops to promote the English, in order to introduce the language” (Jenkins, 346). Nonetheless Evans’ articulation of the “popish” treatment of Wales by England was a rousing cry to other Welsh nationalists.

Since the publication of Katie Trumpener’s *Bardic Nationalism*, Evan Evans has become known for his “A Paraphrase of the 137th Psalm, Alluding to the Captivity and Treatment of the Welsh Bards by King Edward I.” Trumpener opens her study with this poem, citing it as an articulation of “resistance not only to the military conquest of Wales but also to the arrogant assumption of the English that other cultures are there to be absorbed into their own” (4). The poem asks: “shall a haughty king command / Cambrians’s free strain on Saxon land?” (ll. 52-3). It calls for “Vengeance to injured Cambria due” and refers to “Gray’s pale spectre” (ll. 7, 73-4). However, while Trumpener refers to Evans’s adaptation of David’s psalm as “a manifesto for a new nationalist literature,” assuming that Evans’s poem was included in the 1764 edition of *Some Specimens*, it in fact was only inserted in the reprint edition of 1842. Tempting as it may be

to attribute to Evans a revolutionary position in the “bardic nationalism” of the 1760s, his contribution was much more tempered, and ultimately had less cultural impact, than Trumpener’s assessment would suggest. Indeed, had this poem been incorporated into the first edition of *Some Specimens*, the volume might have attracted more attention. However, it was only in the 1842 edition, when the Welsh national revival had reached full swing, that Evans’ poem saw publication and received some notice.

Evans’ own fate was grim. Unfortunately, after the relatively unsuccessful receptions of his subsequent publications following *Some Specimens*, Evans began to suffer financially. He applied several times to Percy for help in securing him a curacy, but Percy, although assuring Evans that he and Johnson would help find him employment, became increasingly negligent in responding to him. And, although Evans made an effort to suggest particular Welsh manuscripts to Percy’s attention, Percy began to say that these lay outside his area of interest. Suffering from ill-health and poverty, Evans arranged to have Paul Panton allot him a small annuity with the promise that upon his death Panton would receive his manuscripts. Evans died in 1789, and the suddenness of his death encouraged false reports that he had committed suicide or died of starvation on a mountain. Unlike Chatterton’s untimely death, which I will be discussing later

in this study, Evans' demise did not result in any posthumous fame. Rather, except for Snyder's chapter on him in his 1923 study *The Celtic Revival*, Evan Evans is referred to only as a passing figure in the history of late eighteenth-century medieval poetical collections. Even his inclusion at the beginning of Trumpener's book, because it misrepresents his influence as a Welsh nationalist, is ultimately deflating.

Despite his failure to attract the kind of attention for his specimens of ancient Welsh poetry that Macpherson did with his publications, Evans' efforts were not devoid of positive results. He set the stage for further attempts to rescue ancient Welsh manuscripts from oblivion. Rice Jones published *Gorchestion Beirdd Cymru (Exploits of the Welsh Bards)* in 1772, and, in the same year that Evans died, William Owen Pughe edited *Barddoniaeth Dafydd ab Gwilym*, a collection of poems by the fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym. Included in this collection were twenty poems sent to Pughe by Edward Williams or "Iolo Morganwg," who we now know forged the transcriptions. Morganwg also helped to edit the *Myrvyrian Archaology of Wales*, a repository of medieval Welsh manuscripts of which the third volume was entirely of his own concoction. Again, this forgery was not discovered until long after the fact. Morganwg invented the "Order of the Bards of the Island of Great

Britain” which he called the *Gorsedd*, that he claimed was part of an ancient ceremonial in South Wales which corresponded with the *eisteddfodau* in North Wales. Evans’ failure to elicit enthusiasm for literal translations of medieval Welsh poetry perhaps prompted these cultural forgeries. Morganwg emulated the successful strategies of Macpherson and Gray, creating momentum for a Welsh national revival that would thrive into the next century.

To conclude, while this chapter has exposed the various ways in which *Some Specimens* failed to amass the cultural capital of the Ossian poems or Gray’s “The Bard,” what it has also highlighted is the various ways Evans was forced to negotiate his Welsh agenda within a literary scene dominated by English sensibilities and expectations. Macpherson’s *Ossian* traced the spirit of liberty – the defining characteristic of Britishness – to the Highland Celts. In attempting to reclaim “Gothic” liberty as a peculiarly English trait, members of the literati such as Percy and Johnson looked to the Welsh, the representatives of the spirit of liberty of the ancient Britons. Selecting Evans as the “right man” to produce an anglicized or at least de-historicized collection of Welsh poetry that could facilitate the incorporation of British liberty into an English framework, Percy coaxed and enticed him to put together such a publication. Evans, however, refused to make his project part of a larger English agenda. Instead, his

collection argues for the ethnic differences between the English and the Welsh. Evans refuses to comply with Percy and Johnson's plan for a collection of Welsh poetry that could be assimilated into an English literary tradition. Instead, he styles the English as barbarous and savage, and contrasts this with his assertion of the Welsh as fierce lovers of liberty. *Some Specimens* might not have enjoyed the success of Gray's highly poeticized versions of Welshness, but, more importantly, it resisted the absorption of the Welsh poetic tradition into an English concept of "Gothic" liberty and set the stage for later articulations of Welsh nationalism.

Chapter 3:

The 'Council of War' and the Construction of a Literary Tradition

In May of 1761, the year following the overwhelming success of James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Thomas Percy emerged from "a council of war with Dr. Johnson," having made a number of resolutions regarding a collection of medieval poetry that was eventually published as his hugely influential *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765). Percy's collection was a carefully edited assortment of medieval ballads and their modern offspring that offered an English alternative to Macpherson's Celtic poetry. The dedication to *Reliques*, ghost-written by Samuel Johnson, professed that these poems depicted "the progress of life and manners," and illustrated "by what gradations barbarity was civilized, grossness refined, and ignorance instructed" (I:vii). In other words, they provided a narrative, a poetic *bildungsroman*, illustrating how the particular conditions of England's development allowed for the progress of a national literature from its barbarous roots to its present civility. Percy's collection promoted a sense of British identity using very different strategies than Macpherson and Evans. Their collections hearkened back to a "golden age" of

literature, where the purity of a unique Celtic language and way of life produced literary testaments to the pre-eminence of Highland or Welsh cultures. Percy's project is not backward-looking; rather it has a forward momentum, using earlier poetry to trace the path of English genius into the present. Because the Saxon race cannot lay claim to a purity of origins in Britain, what Percy's project in effect does is argue that the "genius" of an English-centred Britishness burgeoned alongside the triumph of England's Protestant religion and Parliamentary system, the providential consequence of the Saxon legacy of "Gothic" liberty.

Percy's project was not the only one of its kind. Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-81) placed a similar emphasis on the progress of English literature. Indeed, Warton and Percy collaborated on many aspects of their projects.¹ Ultimately, however, Percy and Warton promoted different medieval identities as the source of British "genius": while Percy's historical model saw

¹ Given that Warton's *History* appeared from 1774-1781, a decade after the first edition of Percy's *Reliques* in 1765, it might seem anachronistic to discuss the development of these two projects together. David Fairer has shown, however, that Warton began his work on his *History* in the 1750s, and Samuel Johnson encouraged Percy to publish his folio manuscript in 1757, so the two writers were, at least for a period of eight years, working on their projects contemporaneously. Indeed, in 1765, the same year that *Reliques* was published, Warton wrote to Percy that his materials for the *History* were "almost ready" (15 June 1765). Throughout this period of correspondence and friendship, Percy and Warton consulted each other frequently on matters of antiquity. Percy attributed footnotes in *Reliques* to Warton, just as Warton's *History* included primary materials and scholarly information gleaned from Percy. "Percy's indebtedness to Warton [for his *Reliques*] is large," Cleanth Brooks writes. "But," he continues,

the northern Goths as the purveyors of liberty in literature, Warton identified the Celtic Britons as the source of a poetic imagination untainted by Catholic tyranny. More specifically, Percy privileged poetry from the border areas of England and Scotland, while Warton located the origins of British poetic genius around the borderlands of England and Wales. These two versions of literary development are able to happily coexist, however, for what is at stake with Percy and Warton's models is not the championing of one medieval identity over another, but rather the notion of the progress of "Gothic" liberty – a version that accommodates both Celts and Saxons – culminating in the victory of Protestantism and the Parliamentary system in England. Their models promote a sense of Britishness antithetical to the blueprints Macpherson and Evans had proposed, for true poetic genius, in their schemes, could not exist among "savages"; rather, while its roots could be traced to the "wild" imagination of Britain's early tribes, British "genius" was the result of an unfettered imagination marrying the political and religious freedoms seen in England under Protestant monarchs. So, even while Percy and Warton articulate differing interpretations of the more ancient divisions that haunt the British national consciousness, their projects can be productively compared because their definitions of "genius"

"how much Warton's *History* owes to Percy has probably never been fully appreciated" (*Percy Letters*, III: xxi).

unite in such figures as Shakespeare and Spenser. They integrate such terms as “genius,” “imagination,” “northern spirit,” and “romantic wildness” into a critical framework of national progress that undercuts the cultural rootedness of projects like Macpherson’s and Evans,’ and develops, instead, a register of “universal” values of literary merit.

My initial concern in this chapter, then, will be with Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*. His collection is published immediately following the success of Macpherson’s Ossian poems and the relative “failure” of Evans’ *Some Specimens*, and in *Reliques* we can distinctly see how the model for a narrative of British literary progress is developed. What is particularly revealing about Percy’s project is the role Samuel Johnson plays in its production. As instigator, writer, editor, and mentor, Johnson helps shape *Reliques* into an assimilating narrative of Britain’s development. His role in helping to develop Percy’s project is not surprising, given his avowed interest in Macpherson and Evans’ publications; however, it is in his direct involvement with *Reliques*, as co-creator rather than critic or supporter, that his London-based version of nationalism is most clearly articulated. By then turning to Warton’s *History of English Poetry*, I will explore how, despite his bias towards the borderlands of England and Wales, his project achieves a similar effect to Percy’s. Indeed, both projects work

to efface intra-national boundaries. The collections trace the progress of poetry inwards, from the borderlands of Wales and Englands, or of Scotland and England, to the cultural metropolis of London's literary scene. My analysis of Warton's project will demonstrate that, although versions of medieval identities might be contested among many eighteenth-century thinkers, what distinguishes literary critics with English sympathies is a commitment, not to any notion of the former glory of a native "genius," but to the history of its "progress."

The *Reliques* and a "Northern Spirit"

The initial idea for *Reliques* came from Johnson himself. In 1757, he wrote to Thomas Percy and encouraged Percy to publish selections from the folio manuscript that he had rescued from being used to light fires in his friend's parlour. Percy was initially reluctant. "If I regarded only my own private satisfaction," he wrote to William Shenstone, his close friend and advisor during his work on *Reliques*, "I should by no means be eager to render my collection cheap by publication" (*Percy Letters*, VII:9). At this time, according to Percy, Johnson "extorted a promise" from him. "Indeed he made me very tempting offers," Percy explained to Shenstone,

for he promised to assist me in selecting the most valuable pieces
and in revisiting the Text of those he selected: Nay, further, if I

would leave a blank Page between every two that I transcribed, he would furnish it out with proper Notes. (*Percy Letters* , II: 9 January 1758)

Johnson's offer of help, and his suggestion to furnish "proper Notes" for such a collection suggest that, as in the case of Evans, he was deeply interested in helping to shape what kind of literary history was going to predominate in the minds of Britons.

It is helpful to our understanding of the creation of Percy's project to have a general understanding of what kind of history Johnson would want to authorize. Johnson's own vision of literary history can be extrapolated, in part, from his other projects. Although Johnson contemplated the universality of human nature in such works as *Rasselas*, he was also fiercely nationalistic. His poem *London*, for example, betrays his partiality for a distinctively English metropolis:

LONDON! The needy Villain's gen'ral Home,
 The common shore of *Paris* and of *Rome*;
 With eager thirst, by Folly or by Fate,
 Sucks in the dregs of each corrupted state.
 Forgive my transports on a theme like this,

I cannot bear a French metropolis. (ll. 93-98)

And, although critics have been divided regarding Johnson's view of literary history, it seems clear from his work on the *Dictionary* that his understanding included the notion that literature and language progressed from barbarity to refinement.² He felt, as John A. Vance has pointed out, that "In the gradual progress of civilization, frequently literature was a harbinger of advancement in general learning and taste" (93). In *The Idler* he maintains that, although English writing of earlier periods was

artless and simple, unconnected and concise. . . from the time of Gower and Chaucer, the English writers have studied elegance, and advanced their language, by successive improvements, to as much harmony as it can easily receive, and as much copiousness as human knowledge has hitherto required. (1759, No. 63, 68)

Literature, then, contributes to the refinement and improvement of society.

For Johnson, the notion of Gothic "liberty" was not tied to the Gothic constitution; he saw all power as having the potential to be corrupt. Instead, he viewed the benevolent rules of King Alfred and Queen Elizabeth as monarchical reigns when the freedom of the people was best preserved. Similarly, he valued

² See John A. Vance, "Looking at Literature, Lives, and the Law" in *Samuel Johnson and the Sense of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

the literature produced during the Elizabethan age. He aligns Spenser with “the writers before the restoration, whose works I regard as the wells of English undefil’d” (I: vii). For Johnson, then, literature, benevolent rule, and the progress of civilized values, went hand in hand, so one would assume that he hoped Percy’s collection would reflect his historical vision.

However, Percy did not immediately seize upon Johnson’s suggestion to publish a version of his folio manuscript. Although Johnson urged Percy to put together his collection in 1757, it was not until 1760 and the publication of Macpherson’s *Fragments* that Percy began serious work to put together a collection of medieval poetry. In September 1760, Percy, Robert Dodsley, and William Shenstone met at the latter’s estate. Shenstone had a reputation as an arbiter of taste, and his estate, the Leasowes, was “a mixture of Gothick wilds and idealized scenes of Augustan cultivation” (Groom, *The Making*, 108). Here, the three men examined Shenstone’s pre-publication copy of *Fragments*. Groom sees this meeting as “the precise point at which serious work began on the *Reliques*” (*The Making* 106). This convergence was a potent mix, involving Dodsley, one of England’s most important publishers, at the home of Shenstone, an influential member of England’s literary elite, assessing *Fragments* while Percy’s folio manuscript lay close at hand. It is not surprising, then, that this

meeting functioned as a catalyst for Percy's two publications of "Gothic" poetry, *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763) and *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765).

Five Pieces of Runic Poetry, a collection of ancient Icelandic verse, was Percy's first attempt to publish translations of medieval poetry. In its Preface, Percy admitted that he had derived the inspiration for it from the success of Macpherson's *Fragments*. *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* had previously been published in Swedish and Latin versions, and Percy became its first English translator. He was modest about the slim volume, calling it a "little work" compared to Macpherson's, but also undermining the status of *Fragments* by slyly hinting that the beauty of the Earse fragments might "owe their superiority, if not their whole existence" to Macpherson (vi). The authenticity of Percy's own translation was established, Percy explained, by virtue of its previous editions in other languages. He also appended the Runic originals to his collection, using them as "vouchers for the authenticity of his version" (xi). His "authentic" publication was a direct challenge to Macpherson's *Fragments*. *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* "was not designed to be bound sympathetically with the *Fragments*," Nick Groom has pointed out, "but to replace it" (85).

Despite its legitimate claim to authenticity, however, Percy's publication was not able to elicit the same interest as the Ossianic verses. In part, the spirit of

the poetry was dulled because of its being translated into Latin and then English, but it also lacked the national bite of the Ossian works. Although the poems were "Gothic," they prefigured, rather than represented, an English tradition, and so did not inspire the same kind of national pride as *Ossian*. Percy's discussion of the Gothic poetic tradition strays from the celebratory mode of *Fragments*. "It will be thought a paradox," Percy writes in his *Runic Poetry*, "that the same people, whose furious ravages destroyed the last poor remains of ancient genius among the Romans, should cherish it with all possible care among their own countrymen: yet so it was" (ii). In this description, Percy is unable to disentangle Gothic poetry from its negative connotations of destructiveness and savagery. While Macpherson emphasized the poetic and moral virtues of ancient Celtic tribes, Percy fails to adequately redeem the Scandinavian Goths, who were believed by many Englishmen including Percy to be the forebearers of the Saxons. As well, the numerous footnotes with which Percy laded his translations made his collection too pedantic for many. Ultimately, Percy's effort, a forerunner of the similarly fated collection of Welsh poetry by Evans, offered translations that lacked the imaginative flair, both in terms of style and historical content, necessary to appeal to eighteenth-century literary taste.

In May of 1761, the same year that *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* was ready for publication, Johnson and Percy met for their “council of war.” Percy’s fears of “cheapening” his folio manuscript through publication seem to have been set aside by that meeting, during which he and Johnson discussed his plans for *Reliques*. Percy emerged from this tête-à-tête having made several resolutions regarding the organization of *Reliques*. The most important of these was his decision not to order the pieces generically, as Alexander Pope and Thomas Gray had proposed to do in their literary histories, but rather to organize them chronologically. This allowed for the survey of the transition from barbarity to civility that Johnson described in his “Dedication” to *Reliques*, and was arguably the most distinctive aspect of Percy’s collection.³ For, unlike *Ossian*, which fixed its ideas about literature and national character to a “golden age” of Celtic poetry, Percy’s collection demonstrated how the rudiments of British literary genius could be seen in some of the nation’s earliest ballads and illustrated how they contributed to the literary genius of Elizabethan icons such as Shakespeare.⁴

³ Percy did alter his initial plan somewhat. Shenstone advised him to retain the chronological organization, but to subdivide two or three volumes into three books, so that all of the older poems would not be at the beginning of the work, thus “disgusting” readers.

⁴ Indeed, the second book of the first volume of *Reliques* is entitled “Ballads that Illustrate Shakespeare,” and includes ballads or songs that have been quoted in Shakespeare or that help illustrate his writing.

“The whole,” reads a summary in the *The Critical Review*, “forms an ethnic history of our ancestors” (Vol. 19, p. 119).

Undoubtedly, then, Johnson either master-minded or fully supported the decision to put the medieval pieces in *Reliques* in chronological order. Two of Johnson’s most important literary projects, his *Dictionary* and *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, tapped into notions that were to be more fully developed in Percy’s *Reliques*. His *Dictionary* provided Britain with a pedigree of the English language from the Elizabethan period to the eighteenth century, a pedigree to which Percy was to add by providing examples of ballads from earlier periods. Percy arranged the poems in *Reliques* with the purpose of “shewing the gradual improvement of the English language and poetry from the earliest ages down to the present” (I:x). Johnson’s edition of Shakespeare – published in the same year as *Reliques* – acknowledged the significance of the Bard’s English medieval sources by using many of Percy’s examples. Percy’s *Reliques* included an entire book devoted to “Ballads that Illustrate Shakespeare.” For both Johnson and Percy, medieval ballads were important for the light they shed on the medieval sources and models for such literary greats as Shakespeare. While Macpherson was concerned with providing an example of a highly-developed literary tradition from an early period, their interest was to show how an author like

Shakespeare was able to draw on the “wild imagination” of previous ages, and unite it with civilized literary values.

Johnson’s involvement with *Reliques* was not limited, either, to an instigatory role. In the November following their “council of war,” Percy describes how Johnson’s interest in his folio manuscript was unflagging. “[H]e never,” Percy admits, “ceased urging me to print the Selection in the *Reliques*” (*Percy Letters*, IX: 84). Indeed, Johnson’s interest in *Reliques* was raised to hands-on involvement when he undertook to visit Percy in Northumberland. On 25 June 1764, Johnson arrived at Percy’s home with his friend Miss Anna Williams and his servant Francis Baker. He stayed almost eight weeks, during which time the finishing touches were put on Percy’s *Reliques*. While he was there, the dedication to *Reliques* was ghost-written by Johnson, and Percy began his all-important “An Essay on the Ancient English Minstrelsy,” which aligned the practices of English minstrels with the Scandinavian Gothic tribes.⁵ Perhaps not coincidentally, Johnson himself was completing his edition of Shakespeare’s plays during his visit. What further alterations and changes Johnson might have made to the rest of *Reliques* is unknown, although Bertram Davis posits that he likely made a substantial contribution to Percy’s essay “On the Ancient Metrical

⁵ When *Reliques* was first published, Johnson’s authorship of the Dedication was not known. It was only upon the publication of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* that the secret was divulged.

Romances.”⁶ In any case, his contributions to the collection were substantial: he initially prompted Percy to undertake the collection, he secured him a publisher, he advised him on how to arrange his materials, he wrote the dedication to the *Reliques*, and acted as a sounding board for Percy before and during his visit. Indeed, Percy refers to him in the context of *Reliques* as “my oracle, JOHNSON” (*Percy Letters*, II: 79), and in his preface to *Reliques* he thanks Johnson for his “many valuable hints for the conduct of the work” (*Percy Letters*, I: xxxi). Given his limited role in influencing the outcome of Evans’s *Some Specimens*, Johnson likely saw in *Reliques* his opportunity to play a determining role in defining England’s literary past.

Reliques answered Johnson’s hopes. When *Reliques* was completed, Johnson, Goldsmith, Percy and others gathered in London for what Bertram Davis has surmised was a celebration of the launch of *Reliques*. While Johnson had referred to the mere antiquarian as a “rugged being,” he saw Percy’s role as moving beyond reproducing antiquated relics. “Percy’s attention to poetry,” he rhapsodized, “has given grace and splendour to his studies of antiquity” (*Boswell’s Life*, 937). Others agreed. Upon its publication on 11 February 1765, it was an immediate success. Six hundred copies were sold by March, and twelve

⁶ See Davis, Bertram H. “Johnson’s 1764 Visit to Percy” in *Johnson after Two Hundred Years*, ed. Paul J. Korshin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

hundred by the beginning of July. Part of the success of *Reliques* can be attributed to Percy's method of "translation." Percy had used the authority of his folio manuscript to lend a legitimacy to his project that Macpherson's publications were never able to lay claim to; indeed, Percy even had Joshua Reynolds paint his portrait with the folio manuscript tucked proudly under his arm. While he used his folio manuscript as the authenticating structure for his collection, however, his translation was anything but literal. As Joseph M. P. Donatelli has pointed out, Percy altered some poems substantially, not only by mitigating the "rudeness" of the language, but also by reshaping their plots to appeal to eighteenth-century tastes.⁷ He explains in his "Preface" to *Reliques* that his "his object was to please both the judicious antiquary, and the reader of taste and he hath endeavoured to gratify both without offending either" (I: xxix). Groom has suggested that Percy followed "the cautionary tale of James Macpherson" and "learned from his mistakes," but it seems more likely that he learned from his errors in putting together *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, and attempted to emulate the desirable characteristics of Macpherson's *Ossian* (*The Making*, 73). He filled in gaps and rough spots in his manuscripts much as Macpherson had done, and similarly claimed that medieval bards "contributed

⁷ See Joseph P. Donatelli, "Thomas Percy's Use of the Metrical Romances in *Reliques*" in *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture* (1989).

to soften the roughness of a martial and unlettered people by their songs and by their music" (I: ix).

Moreover, Percy was able to bolster the value of his medieval translations by underscoring their importance in tracing the development of an English literary tradition. Upon receiving a copy of Percy's book, Thomas Warton wrote to him:

I think you have opened a new field of Poetry, and supplied many new and curious Materials for the history and Illustration of antient Literature. I have lately had a letter from Mr. Walpole, who speaks in very high terms of your Publication. At Oxford it is a favourite Work; and I doubt it not, but it is equally popular in Town. (*Percy Letters*, III: 29 April 1765)

The "new field of poetry" that Percy opened was, in fact, familiar to eighteenth-century readers. In 1711, Joseph Addison's *Spectator* No. 70 had praised the "essential and inherent perfection of simplicity of thought" of Gothic literature. In his assessment of "the favourite ballad of the common people of England," the ballad of Chevy-Chase, Addison demonstrated how this piece adhered to the principles of heroic poems that had been espoused by Homer and Virgil. It is no coincidence, then, that Percy opens his collection with an earlier version of this

ballad;⁸ in effect, he uses “Chevy-Chase” and Addison’s *Spectator* entry to legitimate the “genuine strokes of nature and artless passion” of this and other medieval ballads. He footnotes *Spectator* No. 70 to prove that critics were showing approbation for older poems. This approbation was not uniform, certainly, among the English literati. John Newberry’s *Art of Poetry on a New Plan* (1762) had articulated the oft-heard complaint that the Gothic culture was littered with “absurd and unmeaning tales of giants, champions, enchanted knights, witches, goblins, and such other monstrous fictions and reveries, as could only proceed from the grossest ignorance, or a distempered brain” (II: 154). What Percy’s *Reliques* does that is new, however, is illustrate, through specific examples, how medieval poetry provided the raw materials for “greater” poets such as Shakespeare. Richard Hurd’s *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* had argued in 1762 for the judgment of Gothic works on their own terms (37-8); Percy, instead, offered up medieval ballads as the context by which to understand Elizabethan poets. He acknowledges their dubious status, apologizing for the “rudeness of the more obsolete poems” and asking for “great allowances to be made for them,” but emphasizes their importance to tracing the development of

⁸ Addison believed the “Chevy-Chase” he critiqued was the same one praised by Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson. Percy demonstrated, however, that the Addison’s version of “Chevy-Chase” could not be older than the time of Elizabeth, while his version was much

English literature (I: xxvii). If this was not enough to protect his collection from censure, Percy made sure to highlight the various contributors and supporters of his collection, including Samuel Johnson, William Shenstone, Thomas Warton, David Garrick, Edward Lye, and David Dalrymple, evoking the clout of a London-centred literary elite.

Once Percy establishes the legitimacy of his enterprise in his "Preface," he moves on to the more serious business of his critical framework. Percy's *Reliques* includes four critical essays dealing with the English minstrels, alliterative verse, English romances, and early English drama respectively. These essays make three claims that are essential to Percy's definition of British national character: one, that, English bards are descended from the tradition of the Danish Scalds; two, that this heritage is visible throughout all of Britain, but that Northern English and Southern Scottish ballads reflect this most convincingly; and, finally, three, that this northern bardic tradition retained a genius of imagination that was not evident in the verse of southern minstrels, whose imagination had been dulled by monastic learning. In situating the English literary tradition within Richard Verstegen's "womb of nations" theory, which argues that all Gothic tribes are descended from Scandinavian tribes, Percy develops a historical model

"older" and "runder," likely dating to the time of Henry VI. Percy included Addison's version of "Chevy-Chase" in the third book of the first volume of *Reliques*.

that is unflinchingly “Gothic” in its vision of progress; that is, for Percy the “Gothic” legacy has been the persistent struggle of Gothic peoples to fight for individual, political and religious liberties in potentially stultifying environments. His vision is a direct challenge to Macpherson’s Celtic opus, which view the Celts as the standard-bearers of British liberty.

Percy’s first essay, “An Essay on the Ancient English Minstrelsy,” written during Johnson’s visit in the summer of 1764, was one of his last additions to *Reliques*. In it, he argues for the northern origins of English bards, emphasizing their distinctness from the southern influences of popery and absolutism. He claimed that the English minstrels were similar in manners and reputation to the Northern Scalds, who were “Smootherers or Polishers of Language” (I: xxxiii), explaining that “their customs, manners, and even language were not in those times very dissimilar” (I: xvi). Working from this premise, Percy draws conclusions about the venerable court status of English minstrels from their northern counterparts. Much of his information on the northern scalds was gleaned from Paul-Henri Mallet’s *Introduction à l’histoire de Dannemarc* (1755-6), which he began to translate in 1763 and eventually published as *Northern Antiquities* in 1770. His work on Mallet helped him to establish his claim that

bards were central to English society.⁹ This argument was to meet objections raised by Samuel Pegge.¹⁰ Rather than altering his position, however, in his second edition of *Reliques* in 1767 Percy extended his essay on the minstrels from nine to twenty pages and added extensive footnotes. “The original country of our Anglo-Saxon ancestors,” Percy wrote in his second edition, lay within lands “since distinguished by the name of Juteland, Angelen, and Holstein” (II:xxi); the Jutes and Angles, Percy went on, were a Danish people who comprised two-thirds of the conquerors of Britain. Three or four hundred years after their initial conquest of Britain, the Danes returned to Britain to find

a strong resemblance between both nations in their customs, manners, and even language; and, in fact, we find them to differ no more, than would naturally happen between a parent country and its own colonies, that had been severed in a rude and uncivilized state, and had dropped all intercourse for three or four hundred centuries” (1757, I: xxxiv).

⁹ It was also in this translation that Percy distinguishes, as the majority of those before him had not, between the racial origins of the Celts and the Goths.

¹⁰ At a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries on 29 May 1766, Pegge argued that Percy’s version of the “rank and condition” of the English minstrels was “a false, or at best, an ill-grounded idea” because it rested on the assumption that because Briton and Danish custom accorded a high place in the social order to the minstrel, the same could be said for Saxon custom.

Percy sets up the notion of the familial relationship between the Danes and the English in the above quotation, reinforcing this idea with references to Britain as the “sister nation” of the Danes. Later, he extends the family tree of the Northern Goths by explaining that even the Normans who invaded Britain in the eleventh century were originally a colony from Norway and Denmark. This allows him to draw from the extant knowledge about the French minstrels in Britain, because, he claims, “At more than a century after the Conquest, the national distinctions must have begun to decline,” which must have led, he went on, to the “remarkable intercommunity and exchange of each other’s compositions, which we discover to have taken place at some early period between the French and the English Minstrels” (1757, I: xli). Percy’s elaborations on his theory satisfied Pegge, although they were to meet opposition in Joseph Ritson, who claimed in his *A Select Collection of English Songs* (1783) that Percy’s “An Essay on the Ancient English Minstrelsy” should rightly be called “Essay on the Ancient FRENCH Minstrels” (I: li-lii).

For the first decade after its publication, Percy’s emphasis on the genealogy of the English minstrels was *Reliques*’s most, indeed its only, controversial aspect. For Percy and his readers, much seemed to be at stake with his claim that English culture was essentially northern in origin. But why did it

matter that English culture was most heavily influenced by the northern Goths? By tracing a genealogy of English poetry through the northern Goths, Percy, in a way that he could not in *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, is able to divorce the "Gothic" from its negative associations with the trappings of Catholicism: superstition, tyranny, and monkish learning. These characteristics are attributed to the southern Goths. Of course, England was subjected to the yoke of Catholicism as well, but Percy's scheme accommodates for this. In *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* Percy observes that the ancient Gothic poets, who prefigured the conversion of northern peoples to Christianity, used rhyme "with all the variety and exactness of our nicest moderns, long before their conversion to Christianity" (xii). The illiterate Goths, while barbarous, were able to exercise the utmost poetic licence. In his essay on the English minstrels Percy explains that when the Saxons were converted to Christianity and began to emphasize learning, "the Poet and the Minstrel became two Persons": the poet was a man of learning in the monasteries who preserved his writings in manuscript form; the minstrel travelled around to houses of the great and performed their pieces (I: xv). Percy uses several examples to show that minstrels were held in high esteem by the noblemen's courts until the time of Elizabeth. Thus, Percy's "history" of English minstrels rescues "Gothic" poetry from its negative associations by distinguishing between

the monkish and southern poet of learning, and the northern minstrel whose craft was relatively unencumbered by the evils of Catholicism.

For Percy, then, "imagination" becomes one of the distinctive aspects of the poetry of the English minstrel. This split between poet and minstrel, Percy argues, allowed for the poetry of the minstrels to take a more imaginative and fantastical turn. It is the poetry of the minstrels, those whose poetry is fuelled by imagination, that Percy attempts to rehabilitate in *Reliques*. "Imagination," a poetic characteristic that speaks to the minstrel's liberation from the tyranny of the Catholic church, is installed as a fixture of national identity. Percy argues that the "civilizing" of nations can lead to a decline in the vitality of a nation's poetry, but what is implied in this view is that the kind of monastic learning instituted by the Catholic church, a model of learning that restrains the mind's natural love of liberty, deadens a poetic tradition. What sets British poetry apart from the literature of other nations, Percy insinuates, is that while other nations suffered under the stultifying influence of Catholic "tyranny," the "Gothic" spirit of liberty that invigorated England's earliest inhabitants allowed British "genius" to survive in its unruly form in the northern borderlands until the more "civilized" Protestant governments secured individual freedoms. Britain's literary tradition, then, is a potent mix of northern "imagination" tempered by

civilized values. Upon the Protestantization of England under the benevolent rule of Queen Elizabeth, the poetic tradition of the minstrels was harnessed by a form of learning unencumbered by monkish superstition, and thus gave vigour to the writings of such writers as Shakespeare and Spenser. The French might have come from the same northern parents as the British, but their subjection to the Catholic church smothered their literary imagination.

Percy's conception of British literature, however, does not entail a homogenous literary complexion. On the one hand, his gathering of materials for his collection has an imperialist tenor: he sets up correspondence with Evan Evans "in the very heart of Wales," has friends seeking materials in Ireland and Scotland and in "the Wilds of Staffordshire and Derbyshire," and even asks his friend the physician and poet James Grainger to look in the West Indies (*Percy Letters*, VII: 110). "[T]hus," he proposes to Shenstone, "shall we ransack the whole British Empire" (*Percy Letters*, VII: 110). On the other hand, Percy definitely privileges his materials from the north of England and southern Scotland, both by his placement of them at the beginning of his collection, and his discussion of the superiority of the poets from the north. In part this is due to the emphasis he places on the northern spirit of British poetry. The best of the

Gothic minstrels, Percy argues, are from the north. "There is hardly an ancient Ballad or Romance wherein a Minstrel or Harper appears," Percy explains, but he is characterized by way of eminence to have been 'of the North Countrie' and indeed the prevalence of the Northern dialect in such kind of Poems, shews that this representation is real. The reason of which seems to be this; the civilizing of nations has begun from the South: the North would therefore be the last civilized, and the old manners would longest subsist there. (I: xxii)

Here, imagination is allowed a liberal reign. Ballads in the northern dialect "abound with antique words and phrases, are extremely incorrect, and run into the utmost licence of metre"; yet at the same time, "they have also a romantic wildness, and are in the true spirit of chivalry" (I:xxii). While the ballads written in the southern dialect are too regulated, and are "bordering on the insipid" (I: xxii-xxiii), this "romantic wildness", set in contrast to the "insipid" verse bred by monkish learning, becomes Percy's legitimating factor for the revival of medieval poetry. His "romantic wildness" sets the northern tradition in opposition to the refined, but ultimately corrupt, southern style.

Because Percy emphasizes the vitality of northern poetry, he makes little distinction between Scottish Highland and Northern English poetry, a move that

facilitates an assimilation of Scottish medieval literature into an English tradition.

In speaking of "Edom O'Gordon: A Scottish Ballad," Percy minimizes the question of whether the poem is of English or Scotch authorship:

But whether the author was English or Scotch, the difference originally was not great. The English Ballads are generally of the North of England, the Scottish are of the South of Scotland, and of consequence the country of Ballad-Singers was sometimes subject to one Crown; and sometimes to the other, and most frequently to neither. Most of the finest Scotch songs have the scene laid within 20 miles of England; which is indeed all poetic ground, green hills, remains of woods, clear brooks. (I: 99)

Percy highlights the similarity of landscape between northern England and southern Scotland. In contrast to the distinct characterization of the barren landscape of the Highlands in *Ossian*, Percy emphasizes the similarities between the landscape of northern England and southern Scotland, and thus defines the centre of Britishness to reside in a liminal space that was able to preserve a "northern spirit" the longest.

The seventeenth century saw an increasing validation of a "northern spirit" as one which represented vigour, virility, and manliness, in contrast to the

languor and torpidity of southern nations. Percy Enderbie in his *Cambria Triumphans* (1661), for example, wrote that

Among all the Germans there was at that time no one nation which for great adventures both by Sea and land was more renowned than the Saxons. For touching qualities of the minde, they were bold, hardy, and vainglorious, patiently enduring labour, hunger, and cold, whereunto by the constitution of their bodies, and temperance of the Climate, they seem to be framed, as being very strong, and yet not unwieldy, tall of stature but not uncomely or out of due proportion. For the North Region by reason of the coldnesse of the air, which driveth the naturall heat inward, bringeth forth men commonly of greater courage and ability of body, than those countreys that lye nearer the sun. [sic] (177-8)

This geographical system of categorization feeds into notions of national literary traditions. As Samuel Klinger points out, the glorification of a northern spirit drives an eighteenth-century enthusiasm for the Gothic romance as a genre that provided an alternative to classical models. The common view was that “the romances were medieval, Germanic, non-Roman in their display of those qualities opposed to Roman torpor and depravity,” Klinger explains, “the Gothic

qualities were love of adventure, faith, manliness, honor, and piety" (210). As such, romances were the domain of northern nations.

Reliques promotes the notion of the virility of the romance tradition. Nick Groom has pointed to the visceral qualities of Percy's publication. "The *Reliques* itself welters in gore," he writes, and catalogues "the hacking and slaying of battle, fairy-tale infanticide and implicit cannibalism, and the fatality of love" (*The Making*, 45). However, if these barbaric themes run contrary to the aesthetics of sublimity and sentiment that elevate *Ossian's* performance, they also celebrate a potency and robustness that were identified as peculiarly northern characteristics. In Percy's Northumberland ballads, his preference for the northern regions is sounded most clearly, and in his collection this region emblemizes the immemorial struggle for liberty against tyranny that the Gothic in its political manifestation represents. The beginning poems of the book – "The Ballad of Chevy-Chase," and "the Battle of Otterburne" – are centred around the Northumberland Percys, to whom Percy was indebted for his livelihood. Percy also adds an elegy of Skelton's, "On Henry Fourth Earl of Northumberland," though it causes what he refers to as "some little deviation from our plan" (I: 107). These poems serve Percy's personal agenda to seek preferment from his

patrons,¹¹ given that they shed favourable light on the Northumberland Percys, but they also enact the struggle of liberty against tyranny. The plot of Skelton's poem, for example, describes how the Earl of Northumberland fell victim to the avarice of Henry VII, who was taxing the people in the north of England especially heavily to support his war in Bretagne. After trying unsuccessfully to persuade the king to change his taxing strategy, the Earl of Northumberland has to deliver the news to the people, who are so incensed that they murder him in rebellion. Throughout the poem, the Earl of Northumberland is characterized in the most favourable of terms: he is deemed "a valiant lord and knight" who illustrates "The noblesse of the north" (I:112); and, although "Trew to his prince, in word, in dede, and thought," the poem suggests that perhaps the Earl of Northumberland is the more worthy ruler (I: 109). In the poem, the Earl of Northumberland's household is described as one which "had all the splendour and offices of a royal court," and his lineage is traced in a footnote by Percy to Henry III and Charlemagne (I: 108). In this and other Northumberland ballads, the tyranny of the Catholic monarchy is set in contrast to the valiant courage and

¹¹ In 1756 Percy took up residence in Easton Maudit, near the Northumberland Percys who were later to become his patrons. Percy traced his ancestry to the Earl and Countess of Northumberland, Hugh-Smithson and Elizabeth Percy, and upon his residence at Easton Maudit changed the spelling of his name from Piercy (the Welsh spelling) to Percy. The Earl of Northumberland was raised to a Duke in 1766 and Percy dedicated *Reliques* to Elizabeth Percy in 1765. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that after the success of the *Reliques*, Percy was asked to

honour of the people of the north country. Their distance from the centre of “civility,” or from the abusive control of the Church and State, is alluded to as the reason for their retaining the true spirit of chivalry, that northern spirit of adventure and love of liberty.

The *Reliques* then, are informed in large part by Percy’s allegiance with Northumberland and his patrons. He also was firm in his contention that the Scandinavian Goths were the ancestors of Britain’s Gothic inhabitants, and that Scandinavia was the source of a northern spirit of liberty. Ultimately, however, it was his emphasis on the “progress” of literature from the medieval period to the enlightened Elizabethan age that distinguished his collection and created much of its appeal. Johnson’s interest to have the *Reliques* demonstrate, as he wrote in the Dedication, how “the infancy of genius [was] nurtured and advanced” is its most salient feature. It is not surprising, then, that Thomas Percy and Samuel Johnson were deeply interested in how Thomas Warton was planning to frame his *History of English Poetry*.

Thomas Warton and the “Fugitive Britons”

Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774-81) integrates, as Percy does, conceptions of “imagination” and “romantic wildness” into a definition of

become part of the Northumberland household and was eventually appointed the Bishop of Dromore in Ireland at the Duke of Northumberland’s recommendation.

English "genius." In part, the similarities in *Reliques* and Warton's *History* can be explained by Percy and Warton's interaction in the years preceding the publication of Warton's chronicle. Thomas Warton was an established member of London's literary scene by the time Percy made contact with him in 1761. He had proved himself as a poet with the publication of *The Pleasures of Melancholy* in 1747, and secured his reputation as a critic with his *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* in 1754, which, like his brother Joseph Warton's study of Pope in 1756, celebrated the idea of native genius. A scholar at Oxford, Thomas Warton had entertained Johnson at Trinity College in 1754 and had helped him secure an M.A. degree there. The friendship between Percy and Warton was triggered by two circumstances: the publication of Warton's *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser*, which traced the medieval sources for Spenser's epic, and Percy's desire to find a friend at Oxford to help him procure copies of manuscripts for his *Reliques* and for an edition of the Duke of Buckingham's poetry he was planning. Percy, as he had done several years earlier with Evan Evans, took it upon himself to begin a correspondence with Warton, introducing himself in a letter on 28 May 1761. This date is not insignificant, given that Percy had held his "council of war" with Johnson on 21 May 1761, and contracted the publication of *Reliques* with Dodsley on 22 May 1761. Indeed, it seems likely

that Johnson would have encouraged Percy to seek out Warton, for he himself had considered his usefulness for other projects. In October 1757, the same year that Johnson encouraged Percy to publish his folio manuscript, he penned a letter to Warton, which apparently he never sent, that suggested a university scholar like Warton should undertake some or all of the following projects: an "Ecclesiastical History of England," a "history of the Reformation," the "Life of Richard the First," and the "Life of Edward the Confessor." While Warton never received the letter, he did begin work on his *History of English Poetry*, for which Johnson had only the highest praise. Johnson also approved of Warton's *Observations* and its "advancement" of the literature of his "native country," pronouncing: "You have shown to all who hereafter attempt the study of our ancient authors the way to success, by directing them to the perusal of the books which those authors had read" (*Percy Letters*, III: 16 July 1754). Percy, in his introductory letter to Warton, gave him similar praise:

You have been turning over the Old Romances, I find, to excellent purpose: and indeed they are the books, which a Commentator of Spencer is chiefly concerned to examine, and which yet no Commentator of Spencer ever examined before" (*Percy Letters*, III: 28 May 1761).

Although Percy praises Warton's *Observations*, however, he took issue with Warton's theory on the origins of romance in his text. Warton drew upon William Warburton's theory that romances were eastern in origin. Percy insisted that romances originated in the north. Percy was critical, as well, of Warton's discussion of Arthurian romance. Warton mentioned Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* as a source of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. This was the first mention of Malory in modern literary criticism, and Percy was quick to point out that Malory's work was probably a composite of hundreds of Arthurian English ballads, stating in an initial draft of his letter that they were likely "borrowed from the Welsh, with whom they have to this day all credit of real Histories" (*Percy Letters*, III: 3). For Percy this is an extremely important point, for the Arthurian legends provide the English with a literary heritage on par with the Greeks:

... the Old Ballads about King Arthur and his Knights seem to be as current among our plain but martial Ancestors, as the *Rhapsodies* of Homer were among his countrymen: and that the several Characters of *Agamemnon*, *Achilles*, *Ajax*, *Thersites* & c were not more familiarly known among the Greek's, or more distinctly marked by them; than those of *Arthur*, *Dame Guenever*, *Sir Gawaine*,

Sir *Kay* &c were formerly in England. (*Percy Letters*, III: 28 May 1761)

The Gothic Revival involved attempts by Percy and others, not only to assert a homogenous sense of British identity within the nation, but also to provide an alternative to the neo-classical aesthetics of the Augustan age. Arthurian legends, with their distinctly Celtic imagery, provided a positive alternative to classical models. Percy's insistence on the British origins of Arthurian legend, then, is pivotal to the development of a distinctive national literary tradition. In his *History of English Poetry*, Warton responded by giving weight to Percy's suggestions about the northern origins of metrical romances, although he continued to assert that eastern influences also played a role. Warton embraced fully Percy's ideas on the importance of the British origins of Arthurian legend at length. These changes shaped the nationalist tenor of Warton's conception of British literary history by tracing its origins to native traditions.

Warton's "Preface" to his *History* opens with much the same tone as *Reliques*. "In an age advanced to the highest degree of refinement" he writes, people are interested in "tracing the transitions from barbarity to civility" (I: i). As with *Reliques*, Warton's project is occupied with promoting a vision of the progress of English literature through time. He does not idealize medieval

poetry; in fact he points to “the infinite disproportion between the feeble efforts of remote ages, and our present improvements in knowledge” (I: i). However, an understanding of the earlier poetic efforts of British poetry, Warton argues, is conducive to kindling our imagination, while at the same time encouraging us to cherish the social virtues associated with the cultivation of civility (I: ii). Like Percy, Warton chooses to reject Gray and Pope’s plans to look at poets in terms of their respective schools, and instead orders his poetry chronologically. This strategy allows him to develop his own narrative of the progress of English literature. He can highlight some periods of British history over others, thus obscuring the more distasteful elements of the nation’s past, and emphasizing the influence of periods he views as more positive. Ultimately, this enables Warton to narrativize British identity as the steady progress from barbarity to civility.

Warton’s starting point for describing British national character is the Norman Conquest. The British, he argues, were an “unformed and unsettled race” before the Norman accession (I: vi). “That mighty revolution,” he explains, “obliterated almost all relation to the former inhabitants of this island; and produced that signal change in our policy, constitution, and public manners” (I: vi). For Warton, the “liberties” of the Gothic constitution do not survive the Norman Conquest; rather the Normans, representatives of a northern Gothicism

themselves, bring institutions of “liberty” with them. In tracing the Norman heritage back to the northern Goths, Warton distinguishes them from the southern Goths who sacked Rome. The northern Goths, he argues, retreated to the northern regions, and thus have more “civilized” values. He fixes the Norman Conquest, when such “civilized” values intermixed with the spirit of Britain’s ancestors, as the era “when our [British] national character began to dawn” (I: vi).

Warton’s description of Britain’s ancestors definitely sustains a bias for the Britons, the “original” inhabitants of the island. Throughout his *History*, Warton rejects examples of Saxon poetry. His dismissal of such works could stem from his difficulty with translating Saxon English, but it is more likely that he felt the aggressive Catholicism of these pieces was offensive. Extant Saxon poetry did not show “native images of that people in their pagan state,” and so Warton dismisses the Saxons as an “unformed and settled race” who “received a foreign yoke” too easily (I: vi). In Warton’s dissertation “Of the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe” he is keen to establish the origin and development of the ancient Britons over time. He describes the Welsh as a people of liberty, a people who disclaimed the Roman yoke in the early medieval period and fought against the Saxons. For Warton, this group comprises defenders of liberty, and

represents the “original” British national character. He charts the establishment of the Britons in several adjoining regions: Wales, Cornwall, and some areas of Devonshire and Somersetshire. The inhabitants in these areas intermixed to “a very slight degree with the Romans, . . . long preserved their genuine manners and British character. . . remained partly in a state of independence during the Saxon heptarchy, and were not entirely reduced till the Norman conquest” (I: 5).

Warton repeatedly privileges Cornwall in his narrative, claiming that “Cornwall, in particular, retained its old Celtic dialect till the reign of Elizabeth” (I: 5). Thus, the British national “essence” is preserved through the height of Roman Catholicism in England, and is only brought in contact with larger influences when the Protestant Elizabeth has restored religious and political “liberty” to the nation. His insistence on Cornwall as the repository of national character is clearly important, for in this way he locates the origin of British identity as one which has an English core. Ultimately, Warton’s *History* makes similar claims for the Celtic spirit as Macpherson and Evans do. In his version of the nation’s development, however, the essence of this culture derives its spirit from a region in England; it is not an exclusively Scottish or Welsh prerogative.

Indeed, Warton’s glorification of Britain’s Celtic past is jealously confined to the south-western region of the island. Here he posits a “pure” British

identity that is superior to the more barbaric Gothic tribes that people the rest of Britain. He highlights the Celtic nations' attachment to poetry much as Macpherson and Evans had done, claiming that literature is "the true attendant, as it is the parent, of true religion and civility" (I: 40). Thus, Cornwall and Wales, where the Celtic spirit has survived in its purest state, have the greatest potential for attaining the ideals of "true religion and civility" that literature promotes. Scotland and Ireland are excluded from this celebration of a Celtic ideal. The Caledonians, Warton argues, are descended from the Scandinavian Goths:

The names of places and persons, over all that part of Scotland which the Picts inhabited, are of Scandinavian extraction. A simple catalogue of them only, would immediately convince us, that they are not of Celtic, or British origin. (I: 33)

Warton is able to dismiss the Caledonians' claim to "liberty" that is articulated in *Ossian*. Despite their ability to resist Roman attempts at invasion, they lack the venerable Celtic heritage. Nor was Ireland, which was said to share a Celtic background with Wales, included in Warton's version of British "liberty"; indeed, he spends a significant amount of time distinguishing between Welsh and Irish bardic practices.¹² Even the central regions of the island, often defined as representative of the "core" of Englishness in the eighteenth century, are

tainted by foreign influences. "The Britons living in those countries that were between the Trent or Humber, and the Thames, by far the greatest portion of this island" Warton explains, "had been so long inured to the customs of the Romans, that they preserved very little of the British" (I: 47, fn. g). Only in Wales and Cornwall, Warton's *History* describes, was the spirit of "liberty" preserved. Their inhabitants had such an antagonistic relationship with the Saxons and the Romans that it "inspired them with a pride and obstinacy for maintaining a national distinction" (I: 48, fn. g). It was upon the invasions of the Saxons, Warton explains, that "both countries became indiscriminately the receptacle of the fugitive Britons" and that together "as one people" the Britons united themselves "in a national cause against the Saxons" (I: 6).

Warton reconciles this fiercely independent British spirit with the civilized virtues of the Normans in the period following 1066. Before the Norman Conquest, he explains, Saxons, Scots, Britons and Northumbrians lived in relative peace, but their divisions precipitated a decline in learning that meant the "national character. . . contracted an air of rudeness and ferocity" (I: cxvii). The Norman invasion provided the country "with the rudiments of that cultivation which it has preserved to the present time." The Normans encouraged the growth of a literary and linguistic tradition that "had long been

¹² See Warton's *History*, pp. 51-2.

reduced to the most abject condition," and polished the arts to a "new lustre" (I: cxvii). This combination of raw "imagination" and civilized values is, in Warton's estimation, a providential mix. If classical taste and judgement had been preserved in Britain throughout the medieval period, he proposes,

imagination would have suffered, truth and reason would have chased before their time those spectres of illusive fancy, so pleasing to the imagination, which delight to hover in the gloom of ignorance and superstition, and which forms so considerable a part of the succeeding centuries. (I: clv)

Thus, although the British literary tradition is brought to a "new lustre" by the civilizing imperatives of the Norman Conquest, it is ultimately the "rough unpolished [British] ancestors" that distinguish the British national character. With this version of history, Warton is able to rescue an aspect of the "Gothic" or "medieval" period from its associations with tyranny and popery. The "gloom and superstition" of the Britons stem from their pre-Protestant, pre-rational culture. Their imaginative capabilities, linked with a fierce love of liberty, transcend the negative connotations of England's medieval past under the yoke of Roman Catholicism. In particular, Cornwall, which Warton maintains "retained its old Celtic dialect till the reign of Elizabeth" (I: 5), represents the

repository of the elements of a pagan society, which are mixed with the enlightened values of Protestantism during the Elizabethan era.

The Shaping of a British Literary Criticism

Percy and Warton's projects are distinctly conceived in the sense that they locate the source of native "genius" in different regions of Britain. Percy sees ancient Northumbria as representative of a northern Gothic spirit that evades the negative influences of monkish learning and monarchical tyranny to the south. His celebration of Gothicism is predicated on the notion that Gothic "liberty" was best preserved in "the seeds of our excellent Gothic constitution" (*Percy Letters*, V: 84-5). He elaborates on this theory in his preface to his translation of *Northern Antiquities*, in which he distinguishes between the Gothic and Celtic traditions. "The Celtic nations," he writes,

do not appear to have had that equal plan of liberty, which was the peculiar honour of all the Gothic tribes, and which they carried with them, and planted wherever they formed settlements: On the contrary, in Gaul, all the freedom and power chiefly centred among the Druids and the chiefman, whom Caesar calls equites, or knights: But the inferior people were little better than in a state of

slavery; whereas the meanest German was independent and free.

(xii-xiii)

Furthermore, in *Northern Antiquities* he also argues that the Edda of northern nations was a more solid, unsuperstitious, civil religion. Warton, on the other hand, celebrates Cornwall and Wales as the stronghold of a Celtic identity that is able to preserve the native Briton's love of liberty against the dangers of popery and foreign invasion. In his historical vision, the Saxonist Goths are too subservient to foreign yokes, while the Britons retain the "spirit," if not always the conditions, of liberty. He minimizes the influence of the Druids and their superstitions on the formation of a British national character.

Ultimately, however, their respective histories provide the same logic for locating a peculiarly British identity in their literary narratives. It is the idiosyncratic nature of the progression from barbarity to civility that distinguishes the British nation from foreign traditions. A sustained period of poetic licence, where "imagination" and "fancy" are able to thrive, that is tempered eventually by the enlightened authority of a Protestant monarchy, provides the British literary tradition with a unique balance of invigorating freedom and civilized virtues. In this way, the "dark and gloomy" period preceding the Protestant Reformation can be embraced as a period in which the

“wildness” of the British love for freedom was cultivated; at the same time, Macpherson’s Highlands are excluded, both in terms of ethnicity and progress, from laying claim to the “genius” of the British literary tradition.

Furthermore, it is not insignificant that both of these narratives of progress focus their histories of poetry around the boundaries of the English nation. Groom has suggested that by “By plotting the borders, Percy melded together a national tradition, and clarified Englishness” in a move that drew upon a tradition that was “much more like Scotland than England” (101). It is my contention, however, that Percy’s bias lay with the influence of the Scandinavian Goths and the notion of liberty associated with the Gothic spirit and constitution. By situating the core of Gothic identity on the Scottish-English border, he assimilates Scottish identity into an English version of Gothic liberty, thereby reclaiming the “liberty” which *Ossian* had attached to the Highland landscape. Even his descriptions of the Scottish borderlands try to impose a homogeneity on this so-called “British” Gothic identity. Similarly, Warton creates an assimilative version of the progress of Britain from barbarity to civility, only he focuses his attention on the English-Welsh border. He assimilates the geography of both nations, claiming that “most of the romantic castles, rocks, rivers, and caves, of both nations, are alike at this day distinguished by some noble achievement

[sic], at least by name, of that celebrated champion [Arthur]" (I: 7); and he describes England and Wales uniting as "one people. . . in a cause against the Saxons" (I: 6). Whether the movement from barbarity to civility begins in the south-west corner of the island or in its more northern reaches is ultimately of little concern to the narrative of progress Percy and Warton describe. The most important aspect of their narratives is that they each provide a vision of a national identity shaped by a natural love of liberty and a certain "romantic wildness" that attains its "full lustre" from the civilizing virtues of proper government and religion. These characteristics of a British literary tradition – the "romantic wildness" and "illusive fancy" that reflect "native genius" – become the standards for British literary criticism that we see grow in consequence with the rise in popularity of such poets as Blake and Wordsworth.

Chapter 4:

Thomas Chatterton: Marvellous Bristol and the Marvellous Boy

Thomas Chatterton and his Rowley manuscripts occupy a unique place in the landscape of eighteenth-century medievalism. Writing in the wake of the huge successes of *Ossian* and *Reliques*, it would seem that the precocious seventeen year-old was well placed to launch a literary career by tapping into the growing interest in medieval poetry. His creation of a fifteenth-century monk, Thomas Rowley, who himself had access to eleventh-century manuscripts, allowed for Chatterton to create an enticing mix of history, poetry, war and religion in his medieval pieces. Moreover, the structures of authentication built into his manuscripts through footnotes and intricate cross-references created a tangible past for readers, one that was more “verifiable” than the relatively impalpable oral and fragmentary sources of *Ossian*. However, like Macpherson’s project, Chatterton’s manuscripts ultimately provoked a highly-publicized controversy. The question of “authenticity” again served as the battleground for antiquarians and literary authorities. This time, though, the authenticity of the medieval pieces did not constitute their success or failure; rather, the status of the manuscripts was pivotal in determining one form of

literary success—that of “ancient” native genius— over another—a new model for a particularly “English” romantic genius.

My interest in this chapter is to explore how and why Chatterton’s medieval creations were as threatening to a London-centred literati as Macpherson’s Ossian publications were. Recent Chatterton scholarship has pointed to the issues of regional and national identity that underpin Chatterton’s medieval material¹. Marilyn Butler opens up this kind of interpretation in her 1988 essay on “Romanticism in England,” where she explains that “The most drastic opposition offered to Johnson’s London-centered literary values came from the Bristol poet who killed himself before his eighteenth birthday, Thomas Chatterton” (45).² And, more recently, Nick Groom has argued that Chatterton’s Gothicism “was resolutely English, and resiliently provincial; indeed it was antithetical to the Anglo-Normanism of London” (“*Fragments*,” 3).³ Chatterton’s emphasis on the Saxon spirit fuelling Bristol culture, in comparison to the Norman influences in London, presents his birthplace as the last bastion of Saxon identity in England. This in itself would be menacing to writers with London

¹ Samuel Johnson himself, however, did not acknowledge this threat. On 27 February, 1782, he wrote to Edmund Malone, “In Ossian there is a national pride, which may be forgiven, though it cannot be applauded. In Chatterton there is nothing but the resolution to say again what has once been said.”

² See Marilyn Butler in *Romanticism in National Context* (1988) and Ian Haywood in *The Making of History*.

³ See Nick Groom in *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture* (1999).

sympathies; however, there are more complex issues at stake with Chatterton's "Gothic" vision that I would like to explore in this chapter.

Germane to the disruptive potential of Chatterton's "discovery" of the Rowley manuscripts is the discrepancy between his vision of the past and Percy and Warton's narratives of British literary history. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the *Reliques* and Warton's *History* produced narratives of progress delineating the transition from barbarity to civility in such a way that they excluded the more negative connotations of the "Gothic" from their celebration of British "imagination" and "genius." Chatterton's collection of the works of Rowley, a fifteenth-century monk from Bristol, and his translations of the eleventh-century monk, Turgot, do two things to disrupt these narratives. First, they point to a poetic tradition intimately linked to the Catholic church that nonetheless celebrates a native poetic "genius"; and second, they locate an indigenous British liberty, not in Northumbria or Cornwall, far from the reaches of monastic learning and tyrannical monarchs, but rather in the metropolis of Bristol, a bustling centre of commerce and culture during and after the Norman Conquest. In this sense, Chatterton's manuscript collection once more redefines the "Gothic" past and its significance to the development of British identity. The energy of the debates around the authenticity of the Rowley manuscripts, much

as with the Ossian controversy, I would argue, is galvanized by English concerns that Britain's medieval past needs to be rehabilitated properly.

A final concern of mine in this chapter is to analyze the peculiar shift in focus in the Rowley controversy, from the poems themselves, to Chatterton as the prototypical Romantic poet. In the Ossian controversy, opponents of the poetry's authenticity argued that they were of no value if they were not authentic remnants of a third-century Highland bard. "As modern productions," Johnson pronounced, "they are nothing." In the Rowley controversy, however, their status as supposed forgeries did not significantly undermine their significance. Edmund Malone, although a staunch anti-Rowleian, enthused regarding Chatterton, "[I] believe him to have been the greatest genius that England has ever produced since the days of Shakespeare" (41). Johnson was similarly passionate. "This is the most extraordinary man that has encountered my knowledge," he remarked. "It is wonderful how the whelp has written such things" (Boswell's *Life* 752). Why were Macpherson and Chatterton's projects, although both under fire from threats of forgery, ultimately treated so differently? This disparity could perhaps be explained simply by the fact that, as Ian Haywood has pointed out, "Chatterton's vision was English, Macpherson's Scottish" (122). I believe there is more at issue here. At the end of this chapter, I

will look to reconcile these diverse responses to their writings within the context of the "Gothic" narratives provided by Percy and Warton.

Chatterton and the "Second City of England"

As with Macpherson's works, Chatterton's project was concerned with pointing to a "golden age" of literature; however, while *Ossian* was marked by a strident Scottish nationalism that extolled Celtic liberty, the Rowley manuscripts challenged Bristol's rank in England's hierarchical structure by lauding it as the site of a pure Saxon identity. To make such a challenge, Bristol's reputation as a cultural centre needed to be salvaged. In Chatterton's era, Bristol's image was rather unsavory. A thriving port city, Bristol's culture was defined by its affluent merchant class. Londoners often criticized Bristolians for their lack of education, and their concern with displays of finery, particularly clothing. The *Magna Britannia* criticized the people of Bristol, remarking: "the people give themselves up to trade so entirely, that nothing of the gaiety and politeness of Bath is to be seen here" (qtd in Meyerstein, 20). Bath, the favoured retreat of Londoners, was seen as a vacation spot, rather than a "crass" centre for trade. Bristol was thought of as lacking the civility and polish of London. "The City of Bristol itself is a very unpleasant place and no civilized company in it," Alexander Pope wrote in a letter to his friend Martha Blount in 1739. "Only the Collector of the

Customs would have brought me acquainted with the Merchants, of whom I hear no great Character" (Sherburn, IV: 204). The character of the mercantile population in Bristol was attacked repeatedly during this period, with London merchants explaining, upon describing Bristol merchants outside of their newly-finished Exchange, that "the Bristol hogs have built a sty, but cannot find the way into it" (Huth, 144).

The 1742 edition of Defoe's *Tour* distinguishes between London and Bristol more explicitly. The editors comment on how the mercantilism of Bristol differs from that of London by describing the narrowness of the streets in Bristol, and continuing thus:

. . . we might mention also another Narrow, that is, the Minds of the Generality of its People; for, let me tell you, the Merchants of Bristol, tho' very rich, are not like the Merchants of London; The latter may be said (as of old of the Merchants of Tyre) to vie with the Princes of the Earth; whereas the former, being rais'd by good fortune, and Prizes taken in the Wars, from Masters of Ships, and blunt tars, have imbib'd the Manners of those rough Gentlemen so strongly, that they transmit it to their Descendents, only with a little more of the Sordid than is generally to be found among British

Sailors; and I would advise the rich ones among them, if they would be a little more polite and generous, than they usually are, to travel, but not out of England neither, I mean only to London (that is from the second great Trading town to the first); and they will see Examples worth their Imitation, as well for Princely Spirit, as upright and generous Dealings. (II, 269-70)

The alignment of London merchants with those from a city of classical antiquity is telling, as is the distinction between London and Bristol merchants. For London, trade is presented as somehow devoid of the corruption and deterioration of national identity associated with “the second great Trading town,” Bristol. London merchants, like those from ancient Tyre, are destined to be “Princes of the Earth,” while Bristol merchants, “tho’ very rich” have become so by accident of fortune, and therefore must attempt to model the “Princely Spirit” of those in the nation’s centre. Moreover, Bristol merchants are warned against travelling “out of England” in a hyper-national move to define British character from the center out. The implication is that while Britannia should of course “rule the waves” as an imperial power, for Londoners the “native oak” of Britishness is planted firmly within its metropolis.

Despite efforts to champion his city's past in the Rowley manuscripts, Chatterton's own relationship to his hometown was at least in part predicated upon such negative stereotypes.⁴ In the poetry he claimed as his own, his depictions of Bristol are often scathing. Take, for example, the following lines from his poem "Kew Gardens" (1770), written while in London:

Useless the satire; stoically wise,
 Bristol can literary rules despise:
 You'll wonder whence the wisdom may proceed;
 'Tis doubtful if her Aldermen can read:
 This as a Certainty the Muse may tell,
 None of her Common Council Men can spell. . .
 Every idea of a City Mind,
 Is to Commercial Incidents confin'd;
 True! some Exceptions to this gen'ral rule;
 Can shew the merchant blended with the fool. (423-8, 433-6)⁵

⁴ In Peter Akroyd's 1987 novel about the poet, his Thomas Chatterton mourns: "I was caught fast in this Shit-hole and Whorehouse which I blush to call my Native town" (88). While this representation might paint his attitude in too strong a colour, certainly he often expressed frustration about his environment.

⁵ These lines and all subsequent quotations from Chatterton's writings, unless stated otherwise, are taken from Donald S. Taylor's *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton: A Bicentenary Edition*.

His frustration with his fellow citizens' lack of learning was bound up in material concerns. Indeed, much of Chatterton's antipathy for his fellow Bristolians seemed to be directed towards their lack of generosity and appreciation for culture, both factors which he saw as reasons for his difficulty succeeding in the literary world:

But bred in Bristol's mercenary cell, . . .

What generous passion can refine my Breast

What besides interest has my mind possest. . .

My prudent Neighbours (who can read) would see,

Another Savage⁶ to be starv'd in me. ("The Whore of Babylon," ll. 57, 59-60, 63-4)

Commenting on the disparity between the wealth and charity of his city's inhabitants in "A Burlesque Cantata. 1770," Chatterton describes "Bristol's narrow Streets" as the place "Where pride and luxury with meanness meets" (ll. 1-2).

Chatterton perhaps had some cause to be bitter about the cultural tenor of his city, given his difficulties developing a secure system of patronage for himself there. Even though his Rowley manuscripts should have been appealing to a

Bristol public, they did not elicit high financial returns for him. When Chatterton was attempting to garner support for his "medieval" material, he was using pieces that celebrated Bristolean culture, and most of the pieces were geared towards a Bristol public. The manuscripts Chatterton "discovered" in a chest in St. Mary Redcliff uncannily reflect the interest of those whose support he wished to enlist. For example, Chatterton provided the wealthy Bristol pewterer Henry Burghum⁷ with an appealing family pedigree in a manuscript entitled the "Account of the De Berghams from the Norman Conquest to this time." When William Barrett, a surgeon and antiquarian, was forced to halt his work on a detailed history of Bristol, Chatterton was able to supply him with invaluable material with which to continue his project.⁸ The bulk of Chatterton's Rowley material extolled the virtues of various historical figures from the city, thus presenting an appealing corpus for prospective Bristol patrons. However, because Henry Burghum, George Catcott and William Barrett extended only a

⁶Richard Savage (1697?-1743) died in debtor's prison in Bristol nine years before Chatterton's birth. Chatterton's biographer E.H.W. Meyerstein refers to Savage as "the ingrate" who denounced his city with almost his last breath (Meyerstein 20).

⁷ Henry Burghum and his partner in the pewtering business, George Catcott, along with the surgeon, William Barrett, were the foremost "patrons" of Chatterton's medieval poetry while he was in Bristol.

⁸ In Donald S. Taylor's "Introduction" to *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton*, he outlines what he proposes was the chronology of the composition of the Rowley manuscripts. He determines that the bulk of the material Barrett used in his *History* was written in the months of October and November 1768, immediately following Barrett's and Catcott's discovery of the existence of Chatterton's manuscript material.

limited umbrella of financial support for the young poet, it was necessary for him to seek sponsorship elsewhere.

Chatterton's notorious attempt to enlist the patronage of Horace Walpole was a failure, and certainly the Bristol element of the material Chatterton sent him contributed to this rejection. Attempting to tap into Walpole's interest in English painting⁹, he sent him a manuscript entitled "The Ryse of Peyncteynge, yn Englande," dated 1469, a piece which described the history of art in and around Bristol. Despite Chatterton's strategic use of materials so potentially useful for Walpole, the response to his work was ultimately negative. After Chatterton admitted to his rather lowly position as an attorney's clerk, Walpole became suspicious of his material and consulted his friends Gray and Mason to determine its authenticity. Although class concerns were certainly part of Walpole's initial unease, he claimed later that it was the emphasis on Bristol that was the root of his skepticism. He explains: "At first I concluded that somebody having met with my Anecdotes of Painting, had a mind to laugh at me, I thought not very ingeniously, as I was not likely to swallow a succession of great painters at Bristol" (*Letter to the Editor*. . . 30). And later in his *Letter to the Editor of the Miscellanies of Thomas Chatterton* he comments again on the improbability of

Bristolean “high” culture: “[H]ere let me again remark,” he writes, “how incredible it is that Rowley, a monk of a mere commercial town, which was all Bristol then was, should have purified the language and introduced a diversified metre more classic than was known to the polished courtly poet, Lord Surry” (35).

For Walpole, the idea of a burgeoning literary culture in medieval Bristol was laughable, verging on the ridiculous. For Chatterton, however, this notion was central to his way of thinking about his city. Despite viewing the Bristol of his own day as a “mercenary cell,” Chatterton seemed to seek refuge and comfort in Bristol’s past. Rowley and Canning’s Bristol serves as the positive model against which Chatterton’s contemporary city is measured. In the Rowley manuscripts, Bristol culture is described, celebrated, and idealized. Chatterton’s depiction of Bristol’s past is utopic; for him, the “golden age” of Bristol takes place in the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, in periods where charity, patronage, and civic pride were his city’s mainstays.

Carolyn Williams has recently remarked that Chatterton’s depiction of Bristol’s past “reveal[s] a firm determination to prove that his birthplace is not just a provincial backwater but a great city that could stand comparison even

⁹ From 1762 to 1780 Walpole published the four volumes of his *Anecdotes of English Painting*, and Chatterton sent him material that he hoped would entice Walpole to help him

with the capital" (50). And, indeed, both during the medieval period and in Chatterton's time, Bristol was a significant threat to London's hegemony given its strategic advantages as a trading centre. What Chatterton does in his "medieval" works, however, is portray a productive relationship between trade and the vibrancy of Bristolean culture that, to extend Williams' claim even further, presented it not just as comparable to London, but in fact *superior* to it. Much like Macpherson's attempt to depict the resiliency of Highland culture, Chatterton's medieval manuscripts, both poetical and "factual," interconnect to create a constellation of apocryphal scenes celebrating his city's glorious past and its potential future.

"The Pride of Brystowe and the Western Lande"¹⁰

The scaffolding on which Chatterton's vision of Bristol is raised is composed of a dynamic mix of textual and visual elements. Poems, letters, histories, examples of heraldry, drawings of castles and monuments, descriptions of churches, and even musical scores and painter's bills combine to testify to the city's historical richness. Unlike the sublime, yet often generic, Highland landscapes of *Ossian*, these documents describe carefully-detailed locales, many of which were still visible in the eighteenth century. Ian Haywood has

further.

¹⁰ From "Stay curyous Traveller and pass not bye" in "A Discorse on Bristowe."

described this aspect of the manuscripts as “the very things the rise of social history in the eighteenth century sought to achieve: the elevation of antiquarianism; the small details of the past to mainstream history writing; the building up of the national from the local” (124). This technique does more than capitalize on a general movement, however; it serves to rehabilitate the framework of Bristol’s reputation. By rooting the city’s former greatness, and present potential, in historical fact and material evidence, the Chatterton manuscripts wrap themselves around actual structures of authenticity.

An example of this technique is a poem entitled “On the Dedication of St. Mary’s Church,” which is actually a footnote within the piece “An Enterlude, Plaied bie the Carmelyte Freeres at Mastre Canynges hys greete Howse, before Mastre Canynges and Bishoppe Carpenterre, on dedicatyng the Chyrche of Oure Ladie of Redcleft – hight, The Parlyamente of Sprytes.” The footnoted poem is said to have been written by Thomas Rowley, who is describing Johannes Carpenter the Bishop of Worcester’s dedication of St. Mary Redcliffe Church. Set within a poem inhabited by sprites and witches admiring William Canynge’s “Chyrche of Stone”, “On the Dedication of St. Mary’s Church” employs a more realistic approach, detailing the dress and order of the members of the procession entering the church. “Holie Freeres” lead the way for Johannes

Carpenter “yn Scarlette dreste,” and “Mastre Canynge” with his rosary, who is followed by Procurators and Church Reeves. The poet Rowley, a surrogate voice for Thomas Chatterton himself, describes the holy mass, the singing of psalms, sermons preached by Carpenter and himself, and the reception after the ceremony at the Canynge house, where the “Enterlude” is performed and “Wyne and Ale so Goode” is served. By providing the detail and ritual of this event, in a geographically exact setting peopled by actual historical figures such as Carpenter and Canynge, the poem creates a tangible past that is verified by supporting textual evidence. Not only is the poem a footnote within another piece, but several of Chatterton’s other medieval manuscripts supply supporting documentation. In an assembly of descriptions of “Churches of Bristol,” the entry on “Seyncte Marie of Radcliffe” describes Rowley as an historical authority on the church. In a letter to Thomas Canynge, Rowley describes the church in ruin before its rebuilding and the above-mentioned dedication. These descriptions of the church are animated by a drawing of Redcliff Church in the 15th century. By painting such a vivid canvas filled with varied medieval pieces, the past is opened up to an eighteenth-century Bristol audience through a building in their immediate environment: St. Mary Redcliff Church.

This method of connecting to the past seemed to inspire Chatterton himself. A Bristol friend of his, a Mr. Smith, recalled how Chatterton used to walk with him in Redcliff Meadows, and talk about the ancient manuscripts in his possession:

Sometimes his heart would seem to burn within him; and then pointing to the Church (in viewing which he always took a particular delight) he would, with a glow of enthusiasm on his countenance, tell him a variety of curious particulars relating to it. Look there, would he say, that steeple was once burnt down by lightning! This was the place where they formerly used to act Plays.

(Mathias 20-21)

Chatterton used these kinds of details as points of departure for his corpus of medieval works. By attaching the manuscripts to certain "truths," other facts could be created or altered. St. Mary Redcliffe Church was an entry point into a medieval past for Chatterton: not only did his family live in the shadow of the Church itself, but also his uncle had been its sexton. Indeed, the old manuscripts that sparked Chatterton's interest in medieval poetry had been taken from the church by his uncle, and given to his father to use to cover schoolbooks at his writing school. Chatterton, born after his father's death, saw these manuscripts

as a tangible link to both his father and the Church that loomed so large in his imagination and his physical reality.

Beyond their basic function as imaginative and authenticating structures, though, his emphasis on St. Mary Redcliffe Church and the various medieval churches that graced Bristol, in such pieces as "Churches of Bristol," had more far-reaching implications. In his *History*, Thomas Warton had dismissed the value of medieval Saxon poetry because it did not provide "native images of that people in their pagan state" (I: vi). Chatterton, however, links his poetry intimately with the medieval church. In his poems, it is an institution which provides an environment in which the community can bond socially and spiritually. His depiction of the ceremony in St. Mary Redcliffe Church portrays a benevolent, non-hierarchical cultural nexus without any hints of the negative characteristics of superstition or abusive power often connected with eighteenth-century conceptions of Catholicism. The Church and government work together, but in Chatterton's vision it is William Cannyng, the democratic-minded mayor of Bristol, who is helping fund the Church, and there is no sense of an improper power allotted to the Church. "Sprites and fairies" inhabit the more fantastical poems, rather than emphatically religious images. Thus, Chatterton envisions

the Saxon version of the Catholic Church in a non-prejudicial manner for the eighteenth century.

The Liberty of a Saxon Heritage

The emphasis on Bristol's Saxon heritage is perhaps the most significant aspect of Chatterton's Rowley manuscripts. The claims the poems made for Bristol's ancientness and the persistence of its Saxon culture challenged contemporary histories of Britain. Camden's *Britannia* had been, until the emergence of Chatterton's manuscripts, the authoritative text on England's history. This history, the first part of which was published in 1586, traced liberty back to Saxon and German origins. Bristol took up little more than a page in it, and was described in the text as having little or no historical importance until the 1060s.¹¹ And, although Andrew Hooke's *Bristolgia* attempted to correct this oversight in 1748, Donald Taylor argues that it was only through the kind of evidence that Chatterton's Turgot and Rowley manuscripts supplied that Camden's version of history could be challenged with any authority. A work like Chatterton's "A Discourse on Brystowe," Taylor explains, "was a *Britannia* for Bristol" (2: 866).

¹¹ Camden writes: "For my part, I am of the opinion it rose in the decline of the Saxon government, since it is not taken notice of before . . . 1063" (73).

Chatterton's "A Discourse on Brystowe" is a "historical" document by two authors – Turgot, a Saxon monk writing in the eleventh century, and Rowley, the translator of Turgot's Latin manuscripts in the 1400s – written very much in the style of Camden's *Britannia*. It opens by outlining the earliest dates in which Bristol was remarked upon historically. According to Turgot, one of the first entries mentioning "Bristowe" is in A.D. 638. In a subsequent section by Turgot, after running through a description of happenings between the seventh and tenth centuries, the "history" reads as follows: "'Upon the ascendyng of Edwarde Confessour the Natyon was all turnyd French" (1:103). His manuscript details how Bristol was exempt from this Norman influence because the Saxon Leofwynne was given charter to have authority over the city. "Thus had hee the Castel;" Turgot writes,

& hys fadre Broders, & the Citysens of Bryghtstowe ande Nobilytye of Kente entered ynto a solemne League agaynste the Londoners, Who were almoste alle frencemenne, makynge the sayde League at Bryghtstowe. (1:104)

Bristol becomes a haven for West Saxons in the region, forming a direct counterpoint to London. London's version of "Englishness," it is implied, is actually French in tenor.

What might be at stake for eighteenth-century readers in this interpretation of history is suggested by Gerald Newman's argument in his 1987 book *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830*. Speaking of the literary revolution from 1740 to 1789, Newman explains that "this was a time in English literature of vigorous anti-French cultural 'Stirrings,' marked by efforts to rejuvenate, glorify and assign formal definition to the qualities of native art" (111). He asserts that the literary antiquarianism of this period was borne of a desire to define English culture against the French. "Saxon racial myth figured importantly in the expansion of national ideology," Newman explains. "It provided a broad bottom on which to build the sense of nationality and citizenship" (118). In this context, the Chatterton manuscripts are indeed working to define English culture against the French, but in a way that represents Bristol as the centre of English culture and London as its nemesis.

While the efforts to rework Bristol's historical role can be seen as, in effect, a challenge to Camden's *Britannia*, the method in which this challenge is mounted is indebted to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The Historia Regnum Britannie*. The two historical texts to which we know Chatterton had access were Camden's *Britannia* and Monmouth's *Historia*, and they were likely his main sources of background information for his medieval pieces. Certainly, there are a number

of similarities between Monmouth's method and Chatterton's. Monmouth claimed that his *Historia* was an account of a very ancient book, written in the British language, that had been given to him by another cleric. His account is a focussed history of the Britons, who in the eleventh century suffered the kind of negative reputation Bristoleans did in the eighteenth. Monmouth presents a glowing history of the Britons, detailing their regal line from 1115 B.C. to A.D. 689, a period which was formerly historically obscure, including "factual" evidence to substantiate a genealogical line of royalty back to King Arthur. In essence, Geoffrey of Monmouth does for the Britons and the Welsh what Chatterton does for Bristol and its Saxon roots. Moreover, in a telling parallel to Chatterton's Rowley manuscripts, Monmouth's text is replete with anti-Norman and anti-Roman sentiment. In response to William of Malmesbury's "fawning Francophilia and his precious classicism," Rees Davies explains, Geoffrey of Monmouth "torpedoed their [William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon's] smug Anglocentricity by making Britain, not England, the subject of his work and by providing Britain with a glorious pre-English and non-English past" (10). Davies explains that Monmouth is writing against the desire in the histories of Malmesbury and Huntingdon to tell the story of the English coming together as one people, finally being unified under one king, constantly

moving towards cultural and social improvement.¹² Davies argues that this desire defines English historiography to this day. Chatterton, like Monmouth, disrupts narratives of progress such as Percy and Warton's by suggesting that while London was under the degenerating influence of the Norman Conquest, Bristol became the venerable preserve of Englishness.

In this sense "A Discourse on Brystowe" is the pivotal document in the Rowley manuscripts; indeed, I think it is through this work that the Rowley manuscripts carve the outline for their reconceptualization of the "Gothic." Nick Groom points out in his essay "*Fragments, Reliques, & MSS: Chatterton and Percy*" that the young poet "defined the Saxon spirit as resistance to the Normans in 1066" (3). This notion is central, indeed essential, to Chatterton's vision of medieval Bristol. By showing how, previous to 1066, Bristol and its Saxon leader were resisting the influence of the Normans when Londoners were already, at least in a cultural sense, defeated, the centrality of London in the formation of Englishness is thrown into question. Moreover, I would argue, Chatterton traces the spirit of "Gothic" liberty through the depiction of Bristol as a metropolis which best preserves the Saxon spirit. While other attempts to trace

¹² Rees Davies sheds light on eighteenth-century perspective of this shift in historiographic practice: "The Veneral Bede had written an English history which was essentially providential and salvational; . . . [Malmesbury and Huntingdon] wrote histories which were

the persistence of a Gothic spirit included attempts to find, for example, constitutional continuities in Britain's history, the Rowley manuscripts fix upon two of the most volatile periods in England's medieval past – the Norman Conquest and the War of the Roses – and provide examples of the spirit of "Gothic" liberty thriving in Bristol.

William Canynge and Mixed Government

One of the most persuasive methods of developing this notion of Bristol's spirit of "Gothic" liberty is Chatterton's rewriting of historical events from the perspective of various Bristol "heroes." Real figures like William Canynge, Sir Charles Bawdin, and the Saxon lord Ella, are the central focus of his historical narratives. Their actions and political affiliations are part of pivotal negotiations for a balance of power with the monarchy. Often the liberty of these subjects is threatened by the arbitrary power of the Court. A number of the manuscripts highlight the uneasy power relations between important Bristoleans and English monarchs in the fifteenth century, in a way that strains towards a liberation from Bristol's dependency on and loyalty to the crown. For example, in "Four Letters on Warwyke," correspondence between Thomas Rowley and William Canynge describes the Bristol mayor's political ideas during the Roses War. Canynge

secular, progressive, one might almost say Whiggish. The future of English historiography lay with them" (15).

struggles between his loyalties to the House of Lancaster and his concern over Henry's ability to properly lead England. He fears that Henry, like Edgar, Edward the Confessor, and Henry VI, will develop too comfortable a relationship with the Danes, the Normans and the Warwicks. He suggests that a true leader has a conquering spirit, explaining in a rather unflatteringly simile, "True Englyshmen are lyke untoe masties never pleased but whan set a fyghteing" (632). This canine metaphor reinforces the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century notion that a "Gothic" natural love of liberty and independence of spirit is the domain of "True Englyshmen." Ultimately, Canynge chooses to support Edward and the House of York, but not without expressing anxiety about having to suffer the consequences of unreliable monarchic leadership. He is particularly critical of monarchs because of their ability to be swayed by those close to them. "A Kynge shulde bee one who ruleth hys Pople hymselfe and ne trousteth to untroustie Servantes," Canynge remarks in a letter to Rowley. In a comment that has immense significance for Chatterton's eighteenth-century socio-political environment, Canynge favors a Saxon form of mixed government over absolutist monarchs.¹³ "From the daies of Saxon Governemente to thys presente," he writes in the same letter, "Englande

¹³ For more information on attitudes towards Saxon mixed government, see Philip Ayers *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome* (1997) and Samuel Klinger's *The Goths in England* (1952).

havethe been undone by Priest-Kynges" (1:122). In another set of letters between Rowley and Canynge, we learn that the King has tried to force the unwilling Canynge to remarry. Canynge, desperate to avoid this, ultimately resolves to take religious orders and become a priest. The looming authority of the monarchy is one which, in the Rowley manuscripts at least, seems to threaten but never prevail over the liberty of the Bristol subject, often figured through Canynge. That Canynge is able to find safe haven in the Catholic Church infuses the Church with positive connotations of personal freedom from tyranny that would run counter to many eighteenth-century attitudes towards Catholicism.

Canynge and others are often represented as positive alternatives to the sovereign authority of the actual monarchs in the poems. Edward describes Sir Charles Bawdin as "greater thanne a Kyng" ("The Dethe of Syr Charles Bawdin," l. 340). At one point in "The Yellow Rolle," Rowley describes how Henry VI offered William Canynge the authority to mint coins. When Henry VI displays surprise at his refusal of the privilege, Canynge explains, "you dyspende Heavenne to gette goulde but I dyspende Goulde toe gette Heaven" (I:432). And, at another point, Canynge is described as : "Canynge the great, the charytable, and good, / Noble as kynges if not of kyngelie bloude" (I: 607). As

an alternative model to royal sovereignty, Canynge is a fifteenth-century John Wilkes, a defender of liberty and morals through whom the opportunity for Bristol to thrive as a political and cultural centre is suggested.

The impermeability of Bristol's Saxon culture is emphasized as one of its most positive aspects. In "The Parlyamente of Sprites," the virtue and stability of Saxon culture is extolled. Rowley's "Songe to Ella" shinningly describes the strength of Bristol's Saxon lord Ella, who is able to successfully organize Bristol's defence against the Danes. In this victory: "Bristowanes Menne of myghte, Ydar'de the bloudye fyghte / And acted deeds full Quente. . ." (ll. 10-11). Bristol's continued ability to defend itself from invaders is highlighted when Ella is asked to "Stylle / lette Brystowe be made thie care" and to continue protecting it from foreign dangers (ll. 20-25). The ability to resist invasion is a seminal element in Bristol's cultural definition in this text, one that is both implicitly and explicitly juxtaposed with the vulnerability of the rest of England. William Barrett, using the Rowley manuscripts as historical evidence, explains that Bristol's natural advantages of defence have protected its traditional customs and beliefs. In a passage which seems to echo Hugh Blair's description of the culture from which *Ossian* was produced, he explains that Bristol has not

been susceptible “to those invasions and tempests that have fallen heavy on other ground” (4).

The Rowley Controversy

While controversy concerning the authenticity of *Ossian* sprang up very soon after the Macpherson’s project was completed, Chatterton’s “medieval” creations did not elicit widespread attention until after the first edition of the Rowley poems was published in 1777, over seven years after Chatterton’s death. From 1777 to 1782, a controversy escalated regarding the authorship of the poems, involving such writers and antiquaries as Thomas Warton, Samuel Johnson, Edmund Malone, Jeremiah Milles and Jacob Bryant. In Thomas Warton’s *History*, he opens with complaints about the extent to which “our Saxon ancestors” rendered “absolute and voluntary submission” to the cultural “yoke” of France. Chatterton’s manuscript claims, then, that the Saxon culture in Bristol did not submit so easily, elicits a strong response from him. Warton’s 1782 *Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems Supposed to be Written by Thomas Rowley* is, along with Malone’s *Observations*, one of the best-known attacks on the authenticity of the Chatterton manuscripts. In his arguments, Warton is particularly vehement in his renunciation of Bristol’s Saxon heritage. He asserts that before the Norman Conquest, Bristol was inconsequential, and claims that

“It did not begin to flourish or to be fortified, till after the whole extinction of the Anglo-Saxon government” (63). Indeed, Warton takes care to use a number of examples to support his view that Bristol was insignificant until after 1087.

Edmund Malone submitted that anyone who had “a *taste* for English poetry” would recognize the Rowley poems as forgeries (Malone, 2). He also disputes the Rowley version of Bristol’s history, claiming that Bristol was not called a city until long after the death of King Edward IV (24).

Nick Groom has pointed out that, while Thomas Percy refrained from making a public pronouncement on the Rowley affair, he was nonetheless influential in the anti-Rowleian cause.¹⁴ He collected Rowleiana in a file that included transcripts and original copies of Chatterton’s poems, as well as a manuscript copy of Walpole’s *Vindication*. On 16 April 1773 Percy travelled to Chatterton’s garrett. The Rowleians, led by George Catcott, gave Percy original manuscript copies of Chatterton’s poems to elicit his judgment of them. On 6 December 1773 Percy decided against the authenticity of the manuscripts, declaring them “spurious and modern.” Percy and Warton also exchanged letters regarding the matter. Despite his public silence on the matter, then, Percy was nonetheless active in private debates over the manuscripts. Groom has attributed his public silence to his intimate relationship to the issues at stake in

the controversy, particularly that of manuscript evidence. Above all, Groom explains, Percy “did not want to remind the public that he still jealously guarded the *Reliques folio MS*” (“*Reliques*,”14).

The debates over the authenticity of the Rowley manuscripts centred around, and indeed were pivotal to the development of, an emerging literary critical practice¹⁵; however, underlying this attempt to regiment critical practice was a nationalist agenda, one that can be best fleshed out by comparing the ultimately different ways the Ossian and Rowley controversies ran their courses. The writings which grew out of the Rowley debate repeatedly draw comparisons between the two controversies. Perhaps the most pointed and sustained comparative judgement on the two projects is made in a 1782 publication entitled *An Examination of the Poems by Attributed to Thomas Rowley and William Cannynge with a Defence of the Opinion of Mr. Warton*. Here, the author explains:

The Poems, pretended to have been written by Ossian, have long attracted the attention of the learned. Some few Englishmen were daring enough to deny the authenticity of these poems on their first appearance [Percy and Evans]. . . On the other hand, the

¹⁴ See Groom, “Fragments, Reliques, & MSS: Percy and Chatterton.”

¹⁵ For an elaboration of this idea with respect to Johnson, Percy, Warton and Malone, see Pat Rogers’ article “Chatterton and the Club” in *Thomas Chatterton and Romanticism* (1999), ed. Nick Groom.

North Britons, zealous for the honour of their country, and unwilling to give up their poet as a cheat, have maintained his cause in long dissertations, drawn up with the utmost nicety. They flattered themselves, that they had securely seated Ossian on his poetical throne, when, lo! An antagonist rose in the person of Dr. Johnson, who has deprived Ossian of his kingdom and silenced all his champions.

Similar to the poems above-mentioned are those which have been published under the name of Rowley. Their authenticity has been believed by many, and openly asserted by few. The inhabitants of Bristol are prejudiced in favour of these pieces, because the author is said to have lived amongst them. Indeed, if they are genuine, they will prove that a Bristol priest had excelled even Chaucer in harmony of numbers. – The decision of Mr. Warton, whose knowledge in antiquities has deservedly procured him a great reputation, has not convinced everyone, particularly those whose interest it is to keep the world in ignorance concerning a point of this nature. (6-7)

There is more at stake, however, with the pro-Rowleian stance than civic pride. There is a reinterpretation of the Gothic past, not only prefiguring the Roman Conquest, but also following it, that identifies Bristol as the representative core of British national identity. Thomas Mathias argued that “In the proposed question, whether the Poems of Rowley are authentic or not, I cannot conceive that the fate of nations is involved, or the honour of any individual vitally touched” (9). Similarly, Samuel Johnson argued that the Ossian controversy was perpetuated by critics with a nationalist agenda, but would not do the same for the Rowley debate. He writes to Edmund Malone in February of 1782, after receiving his *Cursory Observations*:

I think this wild adherence to Chatterton more unaccountable than the obstinate defence of Ossian. For Ossian there is a national pride, which may be forgiven, though it cannot be applauded; for Chatterton there is nothing but the resolution to say again what has once been said. (*Letters of Johnson*, IV: 14)

However, during his investigatory trip with Johnson to Bristol, Boswell compared the enthusiasms with which Rowleians and the Highlanders defended their causes. He remarks upon meeting George Catcott that he “was as zealous for Rowley, as Dr. Hugh Blair was for Ossian” (*Boswell’s Life*, 752). Johnson’s

conclusion that “there is nothing” in the Rowley controversy approaching the national pride motivating the defence of Ossian masks the extent to which Bristolians gradually shaped Rowley as their own native hero, a hero who helped legitimate their claim to centrality.

Attitudes towards Chatterton himself were not all positive. As with Macpherson, once the controversy surrounding the authenticity of the Rowley material reached its fevered pitch in 1782, the defamation of Chatterton’s character became just as much a part of the debate as the poems themselves. And, while Macpherson’s credibility was undermined through repeated references to the “morality,” or perhaps more precisely the “immorality,” of Scottish Highlanders, Chatterton was targeted for his class position and the lack of morality this, coupled with the mercantile environment of Bristol, engendered. Rumours abounded concerning Chatterton’s debauched lifestyle. Jeremy Thistlethwaite, a friend and Bristol contemporary of Chatterton’s, attempted to defend him:

It has been said that he was an unprincipled libertine, depraved in his mind, and profligate in his morals; whose abilities were prostituted to serve the cause of vice, and whose leisure hours were wasted in continuous scenes of debauchery and obscenity . . .

the opportunities which a long acquaintance with him afforded me, justify me in saying, that whilst he lived in Bristol he was not the debauched character he has been represented. (Milles, 460).

Regardless of attempts by his family and friends to rescue his reputation, Chatterton's memory was tarnished by rumour and speculation. His apparent suicide provided a justification for a plethora of attacks against his character.

The development of such attitudes permitted disapproval of Chatterton's status as a writer. Thomas Warton, for example, claimed that he was "a hireling in the trade of literature: unprincipled, and compelled to subsist by expedients" (*Enquiry*, 460). Johnson referred to him as "the whelp," Edward Greene as "our Bristol Urchin" (*Strictures*, 83) and, even more vehemently derogatory was Warton's reference to him as "that shitten arse boy." Horace Walpole, in his *Letter to the Editor of Chatterton's Poems*, wrote to the then anonymous editor of Chatterton's Rowley poems:

Consider, sir, what would be the condition of the world, what the satisfaction of parents, and what Peruvian mines must be possessed by the Maecenas of the times, if every muse-struck lad who is bound to an attorney, every clerk. . . should have nothing to do but to draw a bill or couplet on the patron of learning in vogue,

and have his fetters struck off and a post assigned to him under the government. (16)

As with Johnson's attacks on Macpherson's authority, Walpole's attempt here to undermine Chatterton's project is aimed at his ability to serve as a purveyor of culture. As a fettered subject of the lower classes, Chatterton, a mere "lad," is excluded from the form of cultural hegemony Walpole represents. Walpole includes him, however, in the category of forger, from which he with his admittedly fraudulent *The Castle of Otranto* is exempt:

all of the house of forgery are relations; and that, though it be just to Chatterton's memory to say his poverty never made him claim kindred with the richest or more enriching branches, yet that his ingenuity in counterfeiting styles, and, I believe, hands, might easily have led him to those more facile imitations of prose, promissory notes. (89)

Walpole's fear of "every muse-struck lad who is bound to an attorney" being able to have "a post assigned to him under the government" bears significance both for Macpherson and Chatterton. After Macpherson entered the spotlight with his Ossian poems, he was able to secure the interest of Lord Bute and subsequently served in several capacities for the government. Chatterton, it

seems, was working towards a similar goal. His move to London in 1770, the political writings he published in periodicals there, his relationship to John Wilkes, and his admission to his sister that he was willing to “write on both sides of the subject” in political matters if it would help him to be published, suggest that he saw politics as a means, if not an end, for his burgeoning literary career. For Walpole, as well as for other members of the literary and political elite, I suspect, the threat to “the condition of the world” – or, more concisely, England’s class structure--was felt to be real.

After Chatterton’s death, despite the authenticity of his Rowley manuscripts coming under an increasing amount of fire, members of his hometown praised him as a champion of Bristol. Because, unlike Macpherson, Chatterton was unable to answer the charges concerning the authenticity of his Rowley pieces, others took up his cause with a sense of conviction lacking in the Ossian controversy, where Macpherson’s silence in the matter was always a disquieting element. Although the pamphlet war that raged following the first edition of the Rowley material in 1777 subjected Rowleians to ridicule, Bristol pride in Chatterton persisted, and Chatterton and his manuscripts soon became an integral part of Bristol’s cultural heritage. A poem printed in a Bristol

newspaper in the early 1780s by Tasker, called "Poetical History of Trade; Addressed to the Mercantile City of Bristol," reads as follows:

All hail to Bristol!—Commerce's fam'd retreat!

Of Wealth and Merchandize, the happy Seat! . . .

Nor let her wealthy Sons of Taste, refuse,

To own the Tragic, or the Comic Muse.——

To commerce, ——Power and Greatness owe their birth,

And hers the fruitful produce of the fruitful Earth:

Parents of Arts! —— of industry the Child. . . .

Nor Monarchs on the Merchant dare to frown,

Trade brings the Gem, that sparkles in the Crown:

Freedom and Commerce, Briton's claim their own,

On Trade's broad basis stands Britannia's Throne.

Fair Trade and Merchandize are Bristol's pride,

(Nor Wealth from Charity shall aught divide) . . .

Nor antient Bristol did the Muses Scorn,

Here Rowlie, lovely, sweetest Bard was born:

And here his Muse first took her lofty flight,

(Doom'd to Oblivion and the Shades of Night!). . .

The glowing Embers Chatterton relum'd'

Unhappy youth! To swift destruction doom'd! . . .

Nor can the milder Graces quit your Shore.

While each inspiring Muse resides with—More.¹⁶

In this poem, as in the Rowley manuscripts, Trade and Art are described as having a productive, mutually-beneficial relationship. Moreover, Bristol is figured as the foundation upon which England's, indeed Britain's, greatness has been built. Chatterton, here considered on par with Hannah More, represented to many Bristoleans a sign of their city's cultural importance.

Although the above poem mentions Chatterton as the one who "relum'd" Rowley's flame, it seemed that whether the Rowley manuscripts were authentic "medieval" artefacts, or whether Chatterton had fabricated them, they nonetheless represented for inhabitants of the city an example of "the genius of Bristol." In the fall of 1784, after Warton's *Enquiry* and Malone's *Cursory Observations* had been given a chance to do their damage, there were two showings, the second due to popular demand, of the "Commemoration of Chatterton." This three-act performance of songs about Chatterton and his works was only one of the ways in which Bristol celebrated their poet. There

¹⁶ From a newspaper advertisement in *Bristol Scraps*; so far, I have not identified the date of the poem, although presently I guess it was written ca. 1784.

were anecdotes of Chatterton's precocious childhood in Bristol newspapers. And, in 1792, a Bristol newspaper celebrated the plan for a statue memorializing Chatterton. As Nick Groom has noted, a gradual shift takes place in the Rowley controversy from an emphasis on pro-Rowleian and anti-Rowleian debate, to a focus on Chatterton himself. A glorification of Chatterton as the "marvellous boy" was a part of that shift.

"It is wonderful that the whelp has written such things. . ."

Part of this shift was produced by writers who, although they undermined Chatterton's character, nonetheless acknowledged his skill as a writer. Even Edmund Malone, the source of the most authoritative attack against the authenticity of the Rowley poems, admired Chatterton's talent. He claimed: "[I] believe him to have been the greatest genius that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare" (Malone 41). Warton proposed that Chatterton's skill as a writer was his own downfall: "To secure our credulity, he should have pleased us less. He has shewn too much genius, and too little skill" (*Enquiry* 20). Samuel Johnson, although skeptical that Chatterton created his medieval pieces on his own, remarked on his ability: "This is the most extraordinary young man that has encountered my knowledge. It is wonderful how the whelp has written such things" (qtd. in Boswell, 752).

Johnson's position in the Rowley controversy is perhaps the most telling in determining how this debate differed from the one over Ossian. For, while Johnson did visit Bristol to see the Rowley works for himself, he did not comment in print on the authenticity of the manuscripts. This is completely at odds with his behaviour in the Ossian controversy. The harsh pronouncement Johnson made on Macpherson's Ossian poems in his *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, as noted in the above *Examination*, "deprived Ossian of his kingdom and silenced all his champions" (6). Johnson condemned *Ossian* regardless of its authorship. When asked if a modern man could have written one of Ossian's poems, Johnson replied, "Yes, sir; many men, many women, and many children" (qtd in Saunders, 192). "As modern productions," Johnson declared, "they are nothing." In the case of the Rowley manuscripts, however, Johnson – although firm in his belief that they were forgeries – was willing to admit their merit. Indeed, Samuel Johnson told Hannah More that it was unfortunate that she had not been able to marry Chatterton, so "that posterity might have seen a propagation of poets."¹⁷ Chatterton's skill as a writer was acknowledged by the English literati in a way that Macpherson's was not. While

¹⁷ Similarly, David Masson, the author of an 1899 biography on Chatterton, muses on this notion in a whimsical address to Chatterton: "True, she is seven years your senior, extremely sedate, and the very last person in the world to be guilty of any nonsense with an attorney's apprentice. Nevertheless, try. Just think of the train of consequences. . . ." (35).

English critics rallied together around the cause of deflating *Ossian's* claim to authenticity, the Chatterton controversy elicited different kinds of reactions. Warton and Walpole's responses were somewhat extreme because they had personal stakes in the outcome of the controversy. Warton's *History of English Poetry* would have to be re-written if the Rowley manuscripts were authentic. Pat Rogers describes Warton's response to the Rowley manuscripts as follows:

Warton's position as an established scholar in literary history conditioned his response to Chatterton in more than one way. When the story first broke, he was already deeply engaged in the researches which came to fruition in the *History of English Poetry*, although the first volume was not published until 1774. The natural development of the history meant that Warton was able to postpone the awkward question of Rowley until the second volume (1778), but then face it he surely must. No other scholar or antiquarian encountered quite such a direct challenge by the new 'discoveries.' (28-9)

Walpole would fall under heavy fire for having rejected Chatterton's attempt to elicit aid from him.¹⁸ Other anti-Rowleians, however, took a much less

¹⁸ Despite Walpole's interest in the outcome of the controversy, he does not read a lot of the material published about it. In a letter to Cole, he complains, "Both he [Dean Milles] and

oppositional stance. Malone, for example, seemed critical of the poetry only in terms of undermining the authenticity of the poetry; otherwise, he extolled Chatterton's skill as a poet.

The glorification of Chatterton as an author facilitates the fabrication of a different kind of national narrative. The London-centred literati, led by Johnson,¹⁹ are able to disregard the claims made in the Rowley manuscripts that London was both derived from and influenced by Norman culture. And, if Bristol could no longer lay claim to an ancient cultural heritage, Chatterton's literary skill could be seen as a complement, rather than a threat, to the Englishness London represented. In Mathais's *Essay* on Chatterton, he explains the threat Chatterton's poetry might have posed had it been authentic:

In the learned languages, much time has been expended and abilities exercised in settling the texts of the ancient bards, and displaying their beauties and defects. But, now since *almost all* that human abilities can perform has been exhausted in restoring these valuable remains of genuine composition to their original perfection and purity, the learned of our own nation have with

Bryant are so diffuse on our antiquated literature, that I had rather believe in Rowley, than go through their proofs" (106).

great propriety turned their industry to the illustration of those authors, whose names have made the name of England famous, wherever the influence of literature is felt throughout the world. It is now no longer a satire on us that we have neglected our national authors, and all the charms and excellencies of our own language. It cannot therefore be a matter of surprise, that the publication of the poems attributed to Rowley should have sounded an alarm amongst us, and roused the active speculations of every votary to antiquity, science, and poetry. (61-2)

The alarm the Rowley might have created among the literati is sounded here as a potential failure in a national enterprise. By seating the Rowley pieces firmly in the eighteenth century, however, their merit can be adequately saluted.

An example of this rescripting of Rowley's manuscripts can be seen in Britton's *An Historical and Architectural Essay Relating to Redcliffe Church, Bristol*. Britton uses St. Mary Redcliff Church and its association with the Rowley manuscripts as a means by which to reflect on England's greatness. Quoting from Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, Britton contemplates the aesthetic value of the church: "That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism

¹⁹ As Marylin Butler remarks, "though a provincial himself, Johnson sturdily upheld mainstream metropolitan culture, its Latin roots and its link with the Church of England" (Butler

would not gain force upon the plains of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona" (vii). Britton expresses his belief that Chatterton wrote the Rowley manuscripts; indeed, the opening poem on Redcliff Church which serves as the novel's epigraph is assigned to Chatterton rather than Rowley. Britton goes on to celebrate Chatterton's genius. Although he follows in the tradition of undermining Chatterton's moral fabric—"his Burlettas, written for Marylemone Gardens, appear to testify to his intimacy with the leaders of those circles in which no young man of enthusiasm ever moved without corruption" (39)—he nonetheless exalts the role Chatterton's poetry plays in shaping the aesthetic aura of the Church:

the writings or discoveries of Chatterton have also conferred upon the building itself, and on the surrounding scenery a powerful, but adventitious interest. To the general reader, the names of Rowley and of Canynge, are perfectly familiar: their biography has exercised the critical and historical skill of some of the most celebrated writers of the last, and of the present century, and almost every miscellaneous publication that is intended for the closet and family parlour, contains some particulars of the "*gude* priest of Bristow," or of his youthful representative . . . Whether

Chatterton, or a priest in the reign of Edward the Fourth, was the author of *Ella*, and of several similar poems, the church of Redcliffe itself, the monuments that it contains, and the scenery that surround it, certainly owe much of their attraction to these writings. The tomb of Canning might have remained the subject of solitary examination to the occasional visitor, had not his name been coupled with that of the real or supposed author of these extraordinary compositions; and though the architectural beauties of the structure might have excited the partial and occasional admiration of the professional student, or the lover of arts; it is owing to the manuscripts of Rowley, or to the materials of their fabrication, that it has become the object of interesting contemplation to the literary world, and has awakened the inquiries, and exercised the talents, of a Milles, a Bryant, a Warton, a Mathias, and a Southey (2, 6).

Thus, the Gothic architecture of St. Mary Redcliffe Church, William Canynge's role in its preservation, Chatterton's part in eliciting enthusiasm for its beauty, and the culmination of literary genius from Milles to the Romantic Southey, has been composed into a national narrative of continuous progression towards

England's cultural improvement. The radical potential of Chatterton's Rowley poetry to alter Bristol's rank in the nation has, in effect, been written out of the picture. While Macpherson maintained a reputation as the "Grandfather of Lies" (Masson 51), Chatterton is embraced as a representative of English-based British genius, whose imaginative powers grow out of, and are invested in, the landscape and structures of the environment.

In a sense, this shift in viewing Chatterton and his works parallels the various manifestations of "Gothic" liberty. Just as Chatterton's manuscripts are initially important for their potential to radically revision history, so does the notion of the "Gothic" roots of the Ancient Constitution play a pivotal role in reshaping the eighteenth-century understanding of the "Gothic" past.

Chatterton and his native city were subject to vilification, much as the "Gothic" was inextricably linked to the defamation of the Catholic Church and monastic learning. Part of the recycling of the "Gothic" in the eighteenth-century involved its disentanglement from the more factual aspects of history, and its integration into a model of progress in Percy and Warton's literary histories. Similarly, Chatterton's reputation was recycled as an example of Britain's native genius: a representative of the "imagination" and "romantic wildness" that distinguishes English literature and informs British national identity.

Conclusion:

The Progress of Britishness

Richard B. Sher has commented that Johnson's involvement in the Ossian controversy was "a highly emotional affair" for him, "in which his usual standards of literary excellence were sorely compromised" (217). Indeed, for many literary historians in Britain – Hugh Blair, Thomas Percy, Evan Evans, and Thomas Gray, to name a few – the emergence of Macpherson's Ossian poems was an "emotional affair." Passions ran high because the publications confronted Britain's self-conscious styling of the nation as a well-assimilated, if not homogenous, whole. This study has traced the debates and poetical collections which emerged when the Ossian poems drew attention to the differences among British medieval identities. Attempts were made to displace, disprove, assimilate, or imitate Macpherson's project. Despite his project's ability to engage the attention of the nation, however, the continued debates over the authenticity of the poems deflated the claims they made for the role of the Highland Celts in defining Britishness. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century we see literary figures such as Sir Walter Scott dismiss his

fondness for *Ossian* as a childish preoccupation, and enthusiasts of the poems such as Anna Seward claim an indifference for whether they are ancient or modern compositions (*Letters* VI: 277; VI: 315). *Ossian* comes to be used as an imaginative, rather than an historical, source of knowledge. While publications such as Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* continue to feed notions of British identity, *Ossian*, like Chatterton, becomes fuel for the Romantic movement, a fuel now disassociated from its politically-charged career of the 1760s, 70s, and 80s.

What I have accomplished in this study is a direct comparison of the most influential medieval poetical collections produced in the 1760s. By acknowledging all of these projects as fabrications, I have allowed the "forgeries" of Macpherson and Chatterton to be considered on par with Percy's *Reliques*. Thus, the interconnections and disparities among these projects are brought into relief. However, while my exploration of the issues of identity at stake with these collections allows light to be shed on the ways nationalist ideologies are absorbed into literary critical practice, the evolution of these ideas in the years following the relative successes of these collections needs to be explored. For example, the strategies Iolo Morgangwg used to forge his Welsh medieval poetry could productively be compared to Macpherson's in terms of their rehabilitation of national culture. Similarly, W. H. Ireland's Shakespeare forgeries could be

analyzed for their reimaginings of the progress of genius through a rescripting of England's Bard.

My project has also laid the groundwork for a reconsideration of how the medieval poetical collections of the 1760s influenced British critical standards in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although Percy's *Reliques* and Warton's *History* were the "winners" who were, ultimately, allowed to write the dominant version of British literary history, the "medieval" visions of Macpherson, Evans and Chatterton were not without their influence. De-politicized and de-historicized in much the same way as Gray's appropriation of Evans' bardic materials, the Celtic vision of the Ossian poems, for example, was assimilated by the Romantics into English "universal" standards of taste. In Blair's *Dissertation* he praises the purity and simplicity of Ossian's society where "passions have nothing to restrain them" and so language "assumes a poetical turn" (345); in his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), William Wordsworth extols "Low and rustic life" where "the essential passions of the heart find a better soil" and speak "a plainer and more emphatic language" ("Preface," iii). Thus, Wordsworth is able to capitalize on what was attractive about Ossian's poetry, without having to acknowledge the nationalist agenda at play with Blair's celebration of a culture unspoiled by foreign invaders. Major tenets of the

Romantic movement, such as the prominent role of imagination, the preoccupation with descriptions of local scenes, and the interest in the irrational, need to be interrogated for the ways in which they assimilate nationalist agendas into a purportedly de-historicized critical framework. Later in the nineteenth century, critics such as John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold are able to revisit the medieval period without threat to the version of Britishness that emerged out of the eighteenth century. What my project has disturbed, however, is the notion that, while Macpherson and Chatterton produced “forgeries,” Percy edited an “authentic” rendition of Britain’s medieval past; instead, I have shown that the debates around these collections had more to do with what version of the past was more desirable. By tracing how these ideas evolve through the critical practice of the Romantic period and the later nineteenth century, one could draw out the changing attitudes towards Britishness and the British past.

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