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Addison's Indian, Blackwell's bard and the voice of Ossian

Mel Kersey*

University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

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Abstract

In many ways, the 1707 Act of Union encouraged various practices of literary nation-building and the search for authentic 'British' voices. In their desire to assert the politeness of this newly constituted British identity, writers such as Joseph Addison, Thomas Blackwell and James Macpherson shared a preoccupation with a quality which Addison termed 'majestick Simplicity'. The implicit codification of polite manners and taste in the *Spectator* might at first appear to contradict this literary fascination with the search for exemplars of native British simplicity. This article explores the continuity of these concerns in the writings of Addison, Blackwell and Macpherson, suggesting some of the ways that authenticity and politeness exerted conflicting demands on the eighteenth-century literary culture of Britishness.

In *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), Thomas Blackwell observes that 'the greatest Objections against our Poet, arise from the *too great Truth* of his Descriptions; and from his representing his Heroes in those *natural Lights* which we think below the Politeness of our Manners'.[1] Here, Blackwell distinguishes between Homer's supposedly unaffected language and the artifice of modern polite literature. My essay explores the anxieties behind this linguistic distinction. Written

*Corresponding author. Department of English, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
E-mail address: melvin.kersey@stonebow.otago.ac.nz (M. Kersey).

[1]Thomas Blackwell. *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735) 317.

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during his tenure as Professor of Greek (1725–1757) at the University of Aberdeen, Blackwell's *Enquiry* notes the following:

> There is, *My Lord*, a thing, which, tho' it has happened in all Ages and Nations, is yet very hard to describe . . . It may be called a *Progression of Manners*; and depends for the most part upon our Fortunes: As they flourish or decline, so we live and are affected; and the greatest Revolutions in them produce the most Alterations in the other: For the Manners of a People seldom stand still, but are either polishing or spoiling.[2]

In Blackwell's vision of history, social change can be charted on a graph in which the two variables are 'Manners' and 'Fortunes'. Blackwell finds a direct cause and effect relationship between economic change and the state of language in this cyclical social history.

Following the 1707 Act of Union, many British writers addressed the disparities between post- and pre-Union cultures; the *Enquiry*'s sustained focus on socio-linguistic change may be read in this context as an 18th-century attempt to reconcile older, 'purer' cultural identities with the mixed identity of Britishness. That is not to suggest that the cultural identity of Britishness was centrally conceived or disseminated. Like the cultural conventions of politeness, the proliferation of Britishness could not be legislated in any formal sense of the term; it was decidedly an issue of voluntary cultural assimilation on the part of individual Britons. Blackwell's sociolinguistic '*Progression of Manners*' produced an original and influential analysis of Homer, which perhaps has not received adequate attention in terms of British identity. As a student at the University of Aberdeen from 1753 to 1755, James Macpherson appears to have been receptive to Blackwell's arguments in the *Enquiry*. The influence of Blackwell's progression of manners and the subject of politeness can be read in Macpherson's controversial 'translations' of Ossianic poetry.

Ever since his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (1760) reached the shelves of British booksellers, Macpherson's 'translations' have been the subject of intense controversy.[3] The heat of the controversy intensified following Macpherson's publication of the epic poems *Fingal* (1761) and *Temora* (1763).[4] The particular friction between English, Scottish and British cultural identities caused by Macpherson's Ossianic poetry sparked one of the most incendiary and protracted debates in the history of British 'polite literature'.[5] The Ossian controversy highlighted the

[2]Ibid., 13–14.

[3]For an important assessment of the Ossian controversy, see Nick Groom, *The Making of Percy's Reliques* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 275–96. See also Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[4]Although the publication date of the first edition of *Fingal* is listed on the title page as 1762, it actually was on bookseller's shelves by December 1761. '*Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem* was published by Becket and deHondt in quarto volumes on 1 December 1761 in London and eighteen days later in Edinburgh' (Paul J. DeGategno, *James Macpherson* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) 32).

[5]James Macpherson. *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works.* Ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) 51.