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978-0-521-40747-2 - Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland

Thomas M. Curley

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SAMUEL JOHNSON, THE *OSSIAN* FRAUD,
AND THE CELTIC REVIVAL IN
GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

James Macpherson's famous hoax, publishing his own poems as the writings of the ancient Scots bard Ossian in the 1760s, remains fascinating to scholars as the most successful literary fraud in history. This study presents the fullest investigation of his deception to date, by looking at the controversy from the point of view of Samuel Johnson. Johnson's dispute with Macpherson was an argument with wide implications not only for literature, but for the emerging national identities of the British nations during the Celtic Revival. Thomas M. Curley offers a wealth of genuinely new information, detailing as never before Johnson's involvement in the *Ossian* controversy, his insistence on truth-telling, and his interaction with others in the debate. The appendix reproduces a rare pamphlet against *Ossian* written with the assistance of Johnson himself. This book will be an important addition to knowledge about both the *Ossian* controversy and Samuel Johnson.

THOMAS M. CURLEY is Professor of English at Bridgewater State College, Massachusetts. He is the author of several books and articles on eighteenth-century literature, most notably *Sir Robert Chambers: Law, Literature and Empire in the Age of Johnson* (1998).

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*To Ann
Once again and always*

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Prefatory acknowledgments

The original impetus for this study of the Celtic Revival in the age of Johnson occurred during my years as a doctoral candidate under Walter Jackson Bate at Harvard University. John Kelleher, then dean of Irish Studies in the United States, urged me to probe Samuel Johnson's ties to Irish intellectuals involved in the controversy over James Macpherson's fraudulent Scottish Gaelic poetry (1760–3) attributed to the legendary bard, Ossian. I carefully stored the suggestion in my memory for possible use in the future. In the meantime my curiosity turned to other Johnsonian matters of travel, empire, law, and politics. My graduate-school interest in Macpherson did bear some early fruit at Columbia University, where I finally tracked down a copy of William Shaw's rare anti-*Ossian* pamphlet, published in 1782 with Johnson's little-known assistance. In 1987 I spoke about their collaboration at conferences sponsored by the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh and contributed an essay to *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment* (Aberdeen University Press, 1987), edited by Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock. Having published on *Ossian*, I redirected my energies into two decades of scholarship focused on preparing the first biography of Johnson's friend, Sir Robert Chambers, and the first edition of Chambers's Vinerian Law Lectures, which Johnson helped to compose.

When I turned to completing this book, I was surprised to find that my essay on the *Ossian* controversy had provoked my own mini-controversy, with revisionist scholars bent on rehabilitating Macpherson's reputation. This development lent urgency to a project of long choosing and beginning late. It required me to undertake a comprehensive survey of *Ossian* scholarship and a painstaking evaluation of the entire *Ossian* canon, comparing it with genuine Gaelic poetry, in consultation with Gaelic specialists, like Micheal Mac Craith, for the fullest elucidation of the literary deception to date. Without such an assessment discussion of Johnson's personal investment in the contest would have diminished

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value and meaning for readers. Only close analysis of Macpherson's creative process could properly clarify the strengths and weaknesses of Johnson's stance against *Ossian*.

Johnson purportedly stated that "A man will turn over half a library to make one book." My obligations extend to several libraries at home and abroad and to many archivists and scholars who helped me to make this book possible. I happily note the learned intervention of my son, Jon R. Curley, in proofreading my manuscript. I am proud to mention the unfailing assistance of fellow Johnsonians, John L. Abbott, John J. Burke, Jr., the late Donald J. Greene, the late J. D. Fleeman, and the late Paul J. Korshin. My friends, Paul Hamill, Nollaig O'Muraile, and James Reibman, and my colleagues, Charles C. Nickerson, Evelyn Pezzulich, and Louis and Cynthia Ricciardi, all lent their faithful support at almost every stage of this project's unfolding. Among Scottish Enlightenment specialists, Richard Sher taught me to proceed with caution in examining personalities associated with the *Ossian* controversy and furnished me with invaluable documentary evidence of Johnson's patronage of William Shaw. George Mc Elroy made me privy to his unpublished survey of Macpherson's political propaganda and his unpublished stylometric analysis of Shaw's writing for internal evidence of Johnson's contributions. Thomas Kaminski sponsored my presentation of a paper on Johnson and the Irish at a splendid 2003 meeting of the Johnson Society of the Central Region located at Notre Dame University. Then too in 2005 Lance Wilcox kindly oversaw a reading of my paper on *Ossian* at the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies.

Before the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Boston in 2004, I spoke about the need for reassessing recent scholarship exaggerating *Ossian's* reputed authenticity. That experience led to an invitation to engage in an essay debate for volume 17 (2006) of *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*. The result was a monograph-length article, "Samuel Johnson and Truth: The First Systematic Detection of Literary Deception in James Macpherson's *Ossian*," a study which constitutes the intellectual blueprint of this book. I am particularly grateful to Jack Lynch, editor of *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, for publishing my essay and for permission to reproduce material in chapters 5 through 7 below taken from two other articles in volumes 12 (2001) and 18 (2007) of this journal.

I am profoundly thankful for generous funding of my scholarship in England, Ireland, and Scotland from the Center for the Advancement of Research and Teaching at Bridgewater State College, from an Irish-American

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Research Fellowship of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in 2001, and from the National Endowment for Humanities under a Summer Stipend in 1999 and a Fellowship for College Teachers in 2000. I consider myself especially indebted to the president of Bridgewater State College, Dana Mohler-Faria, for conferring on me in 2005 the signal honor of a presidential fellowship, freeing me from a year's teaching duties for final preparation of this book.

Nobody can write a book of scholarship without acknowledging the indispensable aid of all those keepers of archives who guide research, suggest possibilities, and uncover solutions. Therefore, I am very beholden to the gracious staffs of the Houghton and Widener Libraries at Harvard University, the British Library, the National Libraries of Scotland and Ireland, the Signet Library and the General Register House at Edinburgh, the Pearse Street Public Library at Dublin, and the Linen Hall Library and Science Library of Queen's College in Belfast. Siobahn O'Rafferty unlocked the treasures of the Royal Irish Academy, and Stephen Parks directed me to the rich offerings of the Beinecke Library of Yale University. I was supremely served, year after year, at the Maxwell Library of Bridgewater State College by Marcia Dineen, Pamela Hayes-Bohanan, Cynthia J. W. Svoboda, and, above all, Mary Ellen West, who steadfastly made available myriad texts, and Dennis Moser, who created a computerized reproduction of the rare pamphlet in my appendix. To my indexer, Sylvia B. Larson, and my copy editor, Hilary Scannell, I extend my very deep gratitude.

My greatest debt must begin and end at home. To my beloved wife, Ann, who always tells the truth, I dedicate this book on Johnson's love of truth in life and literature.