

WHEN Dr Blair, in 1763, wrote his dissertation on the poems of Ossian, he proposed to accompany it with certain documents in support of the authenticity of these poems. It appears that he had applied to his celebrated friend, Mr David Hume, for his opinion as to what should be the nature of the evidence he should endeavour to obtain on that subject. In answer to this request, Mr Hume wrote the following letters, which, notwithstanding their value to the reader, the Committee should have felt some scruples against inserting here, if they had not already appeared in another publication.

COPY OF A LETTER FROM DAVID HUME, ESQ. TO
THE REVEREND DR HUGH BLAIR, ON THE SUB-
JECT OF OSSIAN'S POEMS.

Lisle Street, Leicester Fields,

DEAR SIR,

19th Septem. 1763.

I live in a place where I have the pleasure of frequently hearing justice done to your dissertation, but never heard it mentioned in a company, where some one person or other did not express his doubts with regard to the authenticity of the poems which are its subject, and I often hear them totally rejected, with disdain and indignation, as a palpable and most impudent forgery. This opi-
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nion has indeed become very prevalent among the men of letters in London; and I can foresee, that in a few years, the poems, if they continue to stand on their present footing, will be thrown aside, and will fall into final oblivion. It is in vain to say that their beauty will support them, independent of their authenticity: No; that beauty is not so much to the general taste, as to insure you of this event; and if people be once disgusted with the idea of a forgery, they are thence apt to entertain a more disadvantageous notion of the excellency of the production itself. The absurd pride and caprice of Macpherson himself, who scorns, as he pretends, to satisfy any body that doubts his veracity, has tended much to confirm this general scepticism; and I must own, for my own part, that though I have had many particular reasons to believe these poems genuine, more than it is possible for any Englishman of letters to have, yet I am not entirely without my scruples on that head. You think that the internal proofs in favour of the poems are very convincing: So they are; but there are also internal reasons against them, particularly from the manners, notwithstanding all the art with which you have endeavoured to throw a vernish * on that circumstance; and the preservation of such long and such connected poems, by oral tradition alone, during a course of fourteen centuries, is so much out of the ordinary

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* So in MS.

nary course of human affairs, that it requires the strongest reasons to make us believe it. My present purpose therefore is, to apply to you, in the name of all the men of letters of this, and I may say of all other countries, to establish this capital point, and to give us proofs that these poems are, I do not say so antient as the age of Severus, but that they were not forged within these five years by James Macpherson. These proofs must not be arguments, but testimonies: Peoples ears are fortified against the former; the latter may yet find their way, before the poems are consigned to total oblivion. Now the testimonies may, in my opinion, be of two kinds. Macpherson pretends that there is an ancient manuscript of part of Fingal in the family I think of Clanronald. Get that fact ascertained by more than one person of credit; let these persons be acquainted with the Gaelic; let them compare the original and the translation; and let them testify the fidelity of the latter.

But the chief point in which it will be necessary for you to exert yourself will be, to get positive testimony from many different hands, that such poems are vulgarly recited in the Highlands, and have there long been the entertainment of the people. This testimony must be as particular as it is positive. It will not be sufficient that a Highland gentleman or clergyman say or write to you that he has heard such poems: nobody questions that there are traditional poems in that part of the country, where the names of Ossian and Fingal, and Oscar and Gaul,
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are mentioned in every stanza. The only doubt is, whether these poems have any farther resemblance to the poems published by Macpherson. I was told by Bourke, * a very ingenious Irish gentleman, the author of a tract on the Sublime and Beautiful, that on the first publication of Macpherson's book, all the Irish cried out, *We know all those poems ; we have always heard them from our infancy ;* but when he asked more particular questions, he could never learn that any one had ever heard or could repeat the original of any one paragraph of the pretended translation. This generality, then, must be carefully guarded against, as being of no authority.

Your connections among your brethren of the clergy may here be of great use to you. You may easily learn the names of all ministers of that country who understand the language of it. You may write to them, expressing the doubts that have arisen, and desiring them to send for such of the bards as remain, and make them rehearse their ancient poems. Let the clergymen then have the translation in their hands, and let them write back to you, and inform you that they heard such a one (naming him), living in such a place, rehearse the original of such a passage, from such a page to such a page of the English translation, which appeared exact and faithful. If you give to the public a sufficient number of such testimonies, you may prevail : But I venture to foretel to you that nothing less will serve the purpose ;

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* So in MS.

pose ; nothing less will so much as command the attention of the public.

Becket tells me that he is to give us a new edition of your Dissertation, accompanied with some remarks on *Temora*. Here is a favourable opportunity for you to execute this purpose. You have a just and laudable zeal for the credit of these poems. They are, if genuine, one of the greatest curiosities in all respects, that ever was discovered in the commonwealth of letters ; and the child is, in a manner, become yours by adoption, as Macpherson has totally abandoned all care of it. These motives call upon you to exert yourself, and I think it were suitable to your candour, and most satisfactory also to the reader, to publish all the answers to all the letters you write, even though some of these letters should make somewhat against your own opinion in this affair. We shall always be the more assured that no arguments are strained beyond their proper force, and no contrary arguments suppressed, where such an entire communication is made to us. Becket joins me heartily in this application ; and he owns to me, that the believers in the authenticity of the poems diminish every day among the men of sense and reflection. Nothing less than what I propose can throw the balance on the other side. I depart from hence in about three weeks, and should be glad to hear your resolution before that time.