

CHAPTER IV THE STORY OF A LITERARY LIE

WHO wrote the stories which are found in the old Gaelic manuscripts we do not know, yet the names of some of the old Gaelic poets have come down to us. The best known of all is perhaps that of Ossian. But as Ossian, if he ever lived, lived in the third century, as it is not probable that his poems were written down at the time, and as the oldest books that we have containing any of his poetry were written in the twelfth century, it is very difficult to be sure that he really made the poems called by his name.

Ossian was a warrior and chief as well as a poet, and as a poet he is claimed both by Scotland and by Ireland. But perhaps his name has become more nearly linked to Scotland because of the story that I am going to tell you now. It belongs really to a time much later than that of which we have been speaking, but because it has to do with this old Gaelic poet Ossian, I think you will like to hear it now.

In a lonely Highland village more than a hundred and fifty years ago there lived a little boy called James Macpherson. His father and mother were poor farmer people, and James ran about barefooted and wild among the gills and glens. When he was about seven years old the quiet of his highland home was broken by the sounds of war, for the Highland folk had risen in rebellion against King George II, and were fighting for Prince Charlie, hoping to have a Stewart king once more. This was the rebellion called the '45, for it was fought in 1745.

Now little James watched the red coats of the southern soldiers as, with bayonets gleaming in the sun, they wound through the glens. He heard the Highland battle-cry and the clash of steel on steel, for fighting came near his home, and his own people joined the standard of the Pretender. Little James never forgot these things, and long afterwards, when he grew to be a man and wrote poetry, it was full of the sounds of battle, full, too, of love for mountain and glen and their rolling mists.

The Macphersons were poor, but they saw that their son was clever, and they determined that he should be well taught. So when he left school they sent him to college, first to Aberdeen and then to Edinburgh.

Before he was twenty James had left college and become master of the school in his own native village. He did not, however, like that very much, and soon gave it up to become tutor in a family.

By this time James Macpherson had begun to write poetry. He had also gathered together some pieces of old Gaelic poetry which he had found among the Highland folk. These he showed to some other poets and writers whom he met, and they thought them so beautiful that he published them in a book.

The book was a great success. All who read it were delighted with the poems, and said that if there was any more such poetry in the Highlands, it should be gathered together and printed before it was lost and forgotten for ever. For since the '45 the English had done everything to make the Highlanders forget their old language and customs. They were forbidden to wear the kilt or the tartan, and everything was done to make them speak English and forget Gaelic.

So now people begged Macpherson to travel through the Highlands and gather together as much of the old poetry of the people as he could. Macpherson was at first unwilling to go. For one thing, he quite frankly owned that he was not a good Gaelic scholar. But at length he consented and set out.

For four months Macpherson wandered about the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, listening to the tales of the people and writing them down. Sometimes, too, he came across old manuscripts with ancient tales in them. When he had gathered all he could, he returned to Edinburgh and set to work to translate the stories into English.

When this new book of Gaelic poetry came out, it again was a great success. It was greeted with delight by the greatest poets of France, Germany, and Italy, and was soon translated into many languages. Macpherson was no longer a poor Highland laddie, but a man of world-wide fame. Yet it was not because of his own poetry that he was famous, but because he had found (so he said) some poems of a man who lived fifteen hundred years before, and translated them into English. And although Macpherson's book is called *The Poems of Ossian*, it is written in prose. But it is a prose which is often far more beautiful and poetical than much that is called poetry.

Although at first Macpherson's book was received with great delight, soon people began to doubt about it. The Irish first of all were jealous, for they said that Ossian was an Irish poet, that the heroes of the poems were Irish, and that Macpherson was stealing their national heroes from them.

Then in England people began to say that there never had been an Ossian at all, and that Macpherson had invented both the poems and all the people that they were about. For the English knew little of the Highlanders and their customs. Even after the '15 and the '45 people in the south knew little about the north and those who lived there. They thought of it as a land of wild mountains and glens, a land of mists and cloud, a land where wild chieftains ruled over still wilder clans, who, in their lonely valleys and sea-girt islands, were for ever warring against each other. How could such a people, they asked, a people of savages, make beautiful poetry?

Dr. Samuel Johnson, a great writer of whom we shall hear more later, was the man of his day whose opinion about books was most thought of. He hated Scotland and the Scottish folk, and did not believe that any good thing could come from them. He read the poems and said that they were rubbish, such as any child could write, and that Macpherson had made them all up.

So a quarrel, which has become famous, began between the two men. And as Dr. Johnson was far better known than Macpherson, most people agreed with him and believed that Macpherson had told a "literary lie," and that he had made up all the stories.

There is no harm in making up stories. Nearly every one who writes does that. But it is wrong to make up stories and then pretend that they were written by some one else more famous than yourself.

Dr. Johnson and Macpherson were very angry with and very rude to each other. Still that did not settle the question as to who had written the stories; indeed it has never been settled. And what most men believe now is that Macpherson did really gather from among the people of the Highlands many scraps of ancient poetry and tales, but that he added to them and put them together in such a way as to make them beautiful and touching. To do even that, however, a true poet was needed, so people have, for the most part, given up arguing about whether Macpherson wrote Ossian or not, and are glad that such a beautiful book has been written by some one.

I do not think that you will want to read Ossian for yourself for a long time to come, for the

stories are not always easy to follow. They are, too, often clumsy, wandering, and badly put together. But in spite of that there is much beauty in them, and some day I hope you will read them.

In the next chapter you will find one of the stories of Ossian called Fingal. Fingal was a great warrior and the father of Ossian, and the story takes place in Ireland. It is told partly in Macpherson's words.