

CHAPTER II.

GENERAL SURVEY AND FIRST NOTICES.

§ 1. General Considerations upon the Reception of the Ossianic Poems in Germany.

Almost a century and a half has elapsed since the literary world of Europe bowed to a new offspring of the poetic muse that many thought would be immortal. The poems of Ossian were assigned to a 'natural genius,' whom men of unquestioned literary sagacity placed next to and even above Homer. Now they are almost forgotten, and their interest lies mainly in the influence they exerted upon some of the greatest minds of the 18th century.

It was in the year 1760¹ that James Macpherson, a Scotch youth of twenty-four,² published in Edinburgh some *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gallic or Erse Language*. Neither Macpherson nor his friends anticipated the tremendous sensation these fragments were destined to make, not only in Scotland and England, but on the whole continent of Europe. But Macpherson was not the man to underestimate the position which he had suddenly attained, and accordingly, emboldened by his initial success, he published in 1761 *Fingal*, an epic poem in six books, and in 1763 *Temora*³ in eight books. With the dispute over the authenticity of the poems we are not here concerned. The researches of modern Celtic scholars have cast much light upon the long-disputed question. They have accorded Macpherson the place that in justice belongs to him, the place of a 'skillful artificer,'⁴ who took a few crude scattered fragments of Irish—not distinctively Scotch—folk-songs as his foundation, and not only lengthened them into more elaborate and re-

¹ The date of the first appearance of the poems of Ossian is often stated erroneously as 1762, so Kürschner's *Dtsche Nat.-Litt.*, Klopstock, Vol. 3, p. xx; Hettner's *Literaturgesch. des 18. Jahrh.*, iii, 2, p. 122; Klopstock's *Works*, ed. Boxberger, Vol. 5, p. xxi; Hofmann-Wellenhof in his biography of Denis, p. 165, etc., etc.

² Macpherson was born in 1736, not in 1738 as generally stated. Cf. Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson*, pp. 32-4.

³ For exact titles of these and following publications, cf. Bibliography.

⁴ We must not overlook the fact, however, that Macpherson's Ossian appeared at a time when literary forgeries were common.