

Ossianic Unconformities: Bardic Poetry in the Industrial Age (Under the Sign of Nature)

Eric Gidal

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In a sequence of publications in the 1760s, James Macpherson, a Scottish schoolteacher in the central Highlands, created fantastic epics of ancient heroes and presented them as genuine translations of the poetry of Ossian, a fictionalized Caledonian bard of the third century. In Ossianic Unconformities Eric Gidal introduces the idiosyncratic publications of a group of nineteenth-century Scottish eccentrics who used statistics, cartography, and geomorphology to map and thereby vindicate Macpherson's controversial eighteenth-century renderings of Gaelic oral traditions. Although these writers primarily sought to establish the authenticity of Macpherson's "translations," they came to record, through promotion, evasion, and confrontation, the massive changes being wrought upon Scottish and Irish lands by British industrialization. Their obsessive and elaborate attempts to fix both the poetry and the land into a stable set of coordinates developed what we can now perceive as a nascent ecological perspective on literature in a changing world.

Gidal examines the details of these imaginary geographies in conjunction with the social and spatial histories of Belfast and the River Lagan valley, Glasgow and the Firth of Clyde, and the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland, regions that form both the sixth-century kingdom of Dál Riata and the fabled terrain of the Ossianic poems. Combining environmental and industrial histories with the reception of the poems of Ossian, Ossianic Unconformities unites literary history and book studies with geography, cartography, and geology to present and consider imaginative responses to environmental catastrophe.



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