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Title: 'Floating in the Breath of the People: Ossianic Mist, Cultural Health, and the Creation of Celtic Atmosphere, 1760—1815'

Abstract: This essay uses Samuel Johnson's characterization of Gaelic culture as an essentially airborne phenomenon as the starting point for a wide-ranging consideration of the links between atmospheric and Celtic discourses during the Romantic era. This period has been deemed foundational to the literary 'appearance' of air and the conceptual formation of Celticity, but these two cultural phenomena have rarely been considered in tandem. Beginning with a discussion of the atmospheric ideas that underpin the *Poems of Ossian's* infamous mists, the essay argues that critics have largely ignored the complexity of Macpherson's medicalized ecologies of air. The essay then moves on to consider the development of comparable cloudy symbolism during the Welsh cultural revival of the 1790s, when overcast skies became an organising metaphor used to express the cultural benightedness of Wales. The often-unexamined cliché of 'Celtic mistiness' is revealed as a vital metaphor for the allure and imperfection of intercultural mediation.

Keywords: Ossian, Mist, Atmosphere, Celtic, Wales, Medical

Floating in the Breath of the People: Ossianic Mist, Cultural Health, and the Creation of Celtic Atmosphere, 1760—1815

When Samuel Johnson claimed that the ‘Earse’ language ‘floated in the breath of the people’ on the Western Isles of Scotland, he didn’t mean it as a compliment. This Celtic language, he asserted in 1775, was largely unwritten, and therefore ‘could receive little improvement’. Its purported airiness, as in the fifth sense of ‘Air’ recorded in Johnson’s *Dictionary*,¹ indicated the weak and insubstantial nature of Highland society, which could never have produced epic poetry of the kind ascribed to Ossian, and was declining so rapidly that it was already ‘too late’ to observe it.² For Johnson, the airborne nature of this language was straightforwardly a sign of cultural ill-health: these floating words reflected the drifting vapours of the Ossianic poems themselves, and carried the implication that Gaelic culture lacked any kind of robust foundation.

Such negative tropes of airy and vaporous Celticity—the most prominent being Celtic mists and mistiness—have only become more established since the days of Johnson and Macpherson. Take for instance J. R. R. Tolkien’s characterisation of the stereotypically ‘wild incalculable poetic Celt, full of vague and misty imaginations’,³ or Scottish Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean’s attack on the Celtic Twilight as a ‘vague, misty, cloudy romanticism’ that was, moreover, ‘a purely foreign non-Celtic development’.⁴ This modern Ossian-inspired meme, however, must be one of the most-cited and least-examined ideas in the histories of both Celtic and Romantic reception. Such avoidance makes some degree of sense: long used as a weapon, as in Johnson’s text, to undermine Celtic-speaking cultures, or applied to Celticity as a smothering stereotype, as complained of by MacLean and others,⁵ Celtic atmospherics are weighed down by centuries of cliché. Those attempting to revive critical interest in Romantic Celticism since c.1990 were perhaps well-advised to handle this trope seldomly, carefully, and

with a degree of ironic distance.⁶ ‘Celtic atmosphere’ is, however, a topic too widespread and significant for Romanticists to push to the side-lines, and one too susceptible to mischaracterisation. It is easy to sympathize, for instance, with MacLean’s anger about the stereotyping of his culture, but we must remember that the ‘vague, misty, cloudy romanticism’ he decried had its roots in the decidedly Celtic Romanticism of Macpherson’s *Ossian*, whose author was a Gaelic-speaking Highlander.⁷ For all his adaptations and distortions, Macpherson was by no means ‘purely foreign’ to the Gaelic or Celtic-speaking world, and his atmospheric innovations deserve serious attention.

In this essay, therefore, I intend to foreground the trope of vaporous Celticity as it originally appears in Romantic-era Celticist texts. And to avoid the appearance of misty cliché, I will ground my readings of these texts in a context that has hitherto gone largely unacknowledged, namely the medicalized atmospheric discourses that are now a growing presence in Romantic literary studies. Samuel Johnson could be as sceptical of this kind of atmospheric thought as he was about Ossianic poetry: Boswell recounts an occasion when his subject declared the effects of atmosphere to be ‘all imagination, which physicians encourage’.⁸ Nevertheless, I will demonstrate how this influential contemporary discourse allows us to read Johnson’s description of Gaelic against the grain, granting the language’s status as an aerial ingredient—and air’s corresponding role as a medium of language—a kind of conceptual strength. In this context, the airborne Celtic words become an ingestible, almost tangible part of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd’s atmosphere: they are cultural matter infusing the surrounding air, circulated, inhaled, and absorbed by the bodies of its listeners and speakers. This reading of Celtic air complicates the straightforwardly negative relationship that both Johnson and MacLean propose linking aeriform Celticity to its attendant cultures—if there was, as Johnson claims, a cultural component to Celtic atmosphere, and an atmospheric component to the

cultural health of Celts, it existed in an intertextual relationship with a hugely influential body of atmospheric thought, which cannot easily be dismissed as an airy nothing.

The Appearance of Celtic Air

It is widely accepted that the long eighteenth century laid the foundations of Celtic identity as we now understand it—its scholarly advances established the Celtic language group, its cultures of tourism introduced Celtic-speaking peripheries to metropolitan attention, and its literary and musical fashions gave rise to ‘Celtomaniac’ bardism.⁹ Less remarked upon is how these developments coincided with the cultural trend Jayne Lewis has termed ‘Air’s Appearance’—that is, the increased ‘visibility’ of air in the period’s scientific and literary texts, linking the aerology of Robert Boyle and Joseph Priestly to the social airs of Pope and the Gothic atmospheres of Radcliffe.¹⁰ With regard to the emerging ‘Celtic nations’ of Britain, it is particularly significant that this period saw an efflorescence of neo-Hippocratic climatology, which (whilst not universally supported by the era’s scientific developments), nevertheless gave rise to innumerable theories about the effects of air on national, ethnic, cultural, and human development.¹¹ Given this coincidence in timing, it is unsurprising that ideas about Celtic atmosphere played a significant role in the process of Celtic definition—though the exact nature of ‘Celtic air’ was by no means uniformly agreed upon.

In fact, there were at least two competing—and arguably conceptually dissonant—definitions of what made Celtic atmospheres distinctive. The first, as alluded to in Mary-Ann Constantine’s contribution to this issue, was the proverbial purity of Celtic air, associated with the mountainous, western, and peripheral locations in which Celtic-speaking cultures were preserved. Even Irish bogs, which had previously been suspected of harbouring noxious vapours, began to be praised in some quarters for their ‘antiseptic’ climates.¹² This untainted

Celtic air was often defined by an absence of particularized characteristics: it was an atmosphere emptied of the unhealthy adulterants found elsewhere. Here, for instance, is the late-Romantic physician James Johnson's description of the healthful qualities of western Irish air:

The whole of the western board of Ireland is washed by a sea as clear and blue as the finest sapphire [. . .] The winds themselves come over the wide ocean, deprived of the slightest tincture of malarious impregnation, impinging with violence on the elevated mountains of Kerry, Clare, Galway, and Donegal, and precipitating their clouds of vapour in torrents of rain. The purity of the air therefore, as well as the water, communicates a degree of salutary influence and sanatory power to sea-bathing on the western shores of Ireland, infinitely superior to that which is experienced by the same process in England.¹³

This is a version of the 'Celtic West' defined by atmospheric and environmental purity, contrasted specifically with the 'eastern and southern' shores of England, whose seas and airs are polluted 'by the debris of a hundred Alps'. In its outlines, if not in detail, it is comparable to Tobias Smollett's Welsh tourists in *Humphry Clinker* (1773), who on visiting another western Celtic periphery in the Highlands, remark on its familiar atmospheric clarity: 'the air and climate [. . .] is all Welch'.¹⁴

However, a second strand of writing about Celtic air, rather than stressing its purity, emphasized instead its permeation with cultural material and meaning. This trope could be expressed negatively, as with Johnson's floating Gaelic, but it was also frequently spun as a positive, indicating the atmospheric strength of localized Celtic culture. Take, for instance, Edward Jones's influential collection *Musical and Poetic Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (1784),

which portrayed the musical ‘airs’ of Wales rising from its landscape, ‘tinctured’ with what Herder might have called the ‘physico-geographical’ character of the nation (Noyes, 215–8):

The music as well as the poetry, of Wales, was tinctured with its peculiar and original character by the genius of the country: they sprung out of the same soil, deriving from its delightful vallies [sic] their soft and tender measures, and from its wild mountainous scenes their bolder and more animated tones.¹⁵

To demonstrate how fully Jones is reflecting medicalized atmospheric discourse, it is worth comparing this passage with a famous one from John Arbuthnot’s *Essay Concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies* (1733), which argued that ‘The local Qualities of the Air depend upon the Exhalations of the Soil, and those of its Neighbourhood’:

The Air near the surface of the Earth, in which all Animals live and breathe, contains the Steams, Effluvia, and all the Abrasions of Bodies on the Surface of the Earth [. . .] from whence it is evident that the Contents of it must be different in different Places.

Elsewhere in the same work, Arbuthnot claims that ‘It seems probable that the Genius of Nations depends upon that of their Air’,¹⁶ a proposition echoed and extended by Jones in the *Relicks*. His Celtic cultural airs, like Arbuthnot’s, are seemingly influenced by ‘steams’ and ‘effluvia’ rising from the physical nation, but they are also themselves cultural ‘exhalations’ of a physico-geographical nationality—atmospheric communication between ‘airs’, air, and landscape in the *Relicks* blurs any easy distinction between culture and environment.

Depictions of Celtic clouds and mist could draw from both these concepts of Celtic air; in James Johnson's Celtic west, 'clouds of vapour' are a prominent part of the pure atmosphere, whereas vaporous 'steams' are a vital component of Arbuthnot's crowded 'Exhalations', as reflected in Jones's 'tinctured' airs 'sprung out of...the soil'. However, in the foundational texts of vaporous Celticity, mists, fogs, and clouds are most clearly associated with the discourse of culturally infused air—as meteorological features that display suspended aerial material to the naked eye, thus making the invisible visible, such vapours are perhaps particularly suited to suggesting atmospheric content rather than its absence. Furthermore, as such visualized atmospheres had the power to both obscure and reveal, hiding a landscape from view before suddenly pulling away, they could become a useful vehicle for the wider cultural concerns of Celtic revivalism. The thickness of such vapours signified Celtic cultural presence, an atmospheric feature increasingly promoted by Celtic-speakers and sought out by anglophones, but it could also reflect the obscurity that Celtic regions had long been subject to, and cultural barriers to communication that remained despite a newly Celtophile climate. The new Celtic mist was, in many ways, a breath of fresh air for Celts and non-Celts alike, but it often threatened to condense once more into an obscuring, suffocating fog.

'The inhabitants of cloudy regions': Macpherson's Mists

Surveys of James Macpherson's intellectual development have long stressed his exposure to cutting-edge Homeric scholarship in the colleges of 1750s Aberdeen.¹⁷ However, Hippocratic contributions to knowledge were also very much a part of the Aberdeen Enlightenment's atmosphere: in a 1753 graduation oration, for instance, King's College regent Thomas Reid praised Hippocrates for having 'laid the foundations of medicine that were never to be shaken'.¹⁸ It is quite possible, therefore, that Macpherson might have read Hippocratic or neo-

Hippocratic texts during his time at Aberdeen, and imbibed some of their environmentalist theories about human health and development. What is certain is that by the time he came to write the *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771), his final post-Ossianic foray into early Celtic history, Macpherson was willing to make remarkably concrete claims about the effects of airborne vapours on British Celts:

The great stature of the ancient Britons may, in some degree, be ascribed to the humidity of the climate under which they lived [. . .] the inhabitants of cloudy regions and swampy countries, even at this day, exceed in stature those who live under a serene sky and on a dry or light soil.¹⁹

Macpherson also includes ‘whiteness of skin’ and beautiful women under the supposed physical benefits of this climate, but I have focused on the above claim because it is so alien to the stereotypical interpretation of Ossianic vapour, which is usually associated with vagueness, transience, and weakness. Here instead we can see a neo-Hippocratic medical context granting mists the power to grow strapping Celtic giants, just as ‘the same temperature [i.e. composition] of air [. . .] favours the extraordinary growth of vegetables’. Mists in the works of Ossian are certainly not always so fruitful and nourishing: old age comes on ‘like the mist of the desert’, fame is like a ‘mist that flies away’, sadness is like ‘the sun in a day of mist’, etc. However, as Hugh Blair notes in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), mist is nevertheless an element that Ossian ‘applies to a variety of purposes, and pursues through a great many forms’,²⁰ not least through combining a heritage of misty Gaelic models with contemporary proto-Gothic sensibility, and (eventually) medicalized theorising.

Macpherson’s engagement with specifically medicalized vapours increases with the progression of his Celticist project. In the original Ossianic collection, the *Fragments of*

Ancient Scottish Poetry (1760), such concerns are not explicitly present—however, with each new published work, Macpherson grafts medicalized elements onto the airy foundations established in that first volume. Mists in the *Fragments* do not deviate too far from the Ossianic stereotype: they are suggestive but lightly-drawn descriptive effects, associated in particular with the transient yet lingering lives of dead Caledonians. In ‘Fragment II’, for instance, those ‘whom the mist of the hill had concealed’ turn out to be the speaker’s deceased companions, whilst the ghost of his lover—dead from a broken heart—‘sails away [. . .] as grey mist before the wind’.²¹ Similarly, in ‘Fragment V’, a ‘grey mist rests on the hills’ around the site of ‘the grave of Connal’, where ‘at times are seen [. . .] the ghosts of the deceased’ (*Fragments*, 23).

The latter quotation in particular underlines Macpherson’s long-acknowledged debt to the anglophone ‘graveyard school’: compare, for instance, the ‘Thick Mists’ in Robert Blair’s *The Grave* (1743), that rest ‘like a weary Cloud’ on the burial site of a forgotten corpse.²² The mists’ specifically supernatural associations, however, might have more to do with the poems’ Gaelic contexts. Joep Leerssen has suggested a connection between the ‘liminal’ atmosphere of Ossian and the Gaelic literary trope of ‘*ceó draoidheachta*’, or ‘magic mist’ (‘Ossianic Liminality’, 14): he cites as evidence a contemporary Irish *aisling* by Eoghan Rua o Súilleabháin, but comparable poems such as Eachann MacLeoid’s ‘*An Taisbean*’ are extant in Scottish Gaelic, and a magic mist descends in one of the genuine Ossianic ballads found in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*.²³ However, valuable as this observation might be, the Gaelic literary ‘*ceó draoidheachta*’ is primarily associated not with ghosts, but with magical concealment and non-ghostly visions. A more pleasingly straightforward comparison may be found in Robert Kirk’s ‘Scottish-Irish’ folklore collection *The Secret Commonwealth* (1692), written on the borders of the then-Gàidhealtachd in Aberfoyle: in this, the bodies of supernatural apparitions are ‘somewhat of the nature of a condens’d cloud’, and though primarily associated with the ‘sith [. . .] or Fairies’, such ‘bodies of air’ are also said to be used

by the souls of the dead.²⁴ Kirk's text alone cannot prove that such traditions stretched to Macpherson's time (or to his corner of the Gàidhealtachd), but the similarity between Kirk and Ossian's vaporous spirits makes it a tantalising possibility.

Macpherson's vapours are therefore already complex suspensions of multi-cultural and multi-lingual meaning, even before their author had recourse to medicalized atmospherics. This latter development first occurs in *Fingal* (1762), the second Ossianic collection: in 'The Death of Cuchullin', for instance, the hero is described as being 'like the vapour of death, slowly borne by sultry winds' (*Fingal*, 146), which in a footnote is linked—via Pope's *Iliad*—to the Classical belief that the South Wind carried bad air.²⁵ This Hippocratic maxim was far from being an antique relic in Macpherson's time, and its influence on eighteenth-century medicine remained strong: John Arbuthnot cited it when describing the conditions of fever, putrefaction, and plague (*Effects of Air*, 145, 167, 182), and it was influential well into the nineteenth century.²⁶ In making this wind the vehicle of a self-consciously Homeric simile, Macpherson implied that the environmental understanding of Celts matched that of acknowledged Classical authorities, and invited readers to consider Ossianic mists as more than just sublime set-dressing. Another eighteenth-century medical commonplace invoked in the *Fingal* volume is the belief that stagnant water produced miasmatic exhalations. A simile in the title-poem, for instance, compares the 'valiant Duchomar' to 'the mist of marshy Lano, when it falls over the plains of autumn and brings death to the people', a reference glossed in another poem as follows: 'Lano was a lake of Scandinavia remarkable, in the days of Ossian, for emitting a pestilential vapour in Autumn' (*Fingal*, 7, 108). The miasmas of Lano crop up repeatedly in *Fingal*, in part because the lake provides a setting in 'The War of Inis-Thona', but also because its vapours become associated with the misty bodies of ghosts. Thus when the spirit of Trenmor appears in 'The War of Caros', we are told that 'his robe is of the mist of Lano, that brings death to the people' (*Fingal*, 101), and elsewhere blind Ossian asks the ghost of Conlath 'Art

thou like the mist of Lano [. . .] ?' (*Fingal*, 122). Already linked with death via 'graveyard' poetry, Gaelic verse, and possible oral tradition, Ossian's mists have now become infused with the neo-classical miasmas of contemporary medicine.

But if Ossian's medicalized mists are associated so strongly with death and contagion, how might they be connected to the apparently healthful and strengthening vapours of the *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*? Macpherson's poetic and historical writings might seem to contradict one another here: however, in his final Ossianic collection *Temora* (1763), Macpherson resolves this apparent dissonance by setting out a surprisingly complex model of Celtic aerography, in which a functioning interface between culture and atmosphere purifies mist's noxious potential.

In the title-poem of *Temora*, the miasmas of Lano are replaced by those of Lego, a similarly marshy (and similarly named) Irish lake, whose vapours take centre stage in the introduction to Book VII:

From the wood-skirted waters of Lego, ascend, at times, grey bosomed mists [. . .] Wide over Lara's stream, is poured the vapour dark and deep [. . .] With this clothe the spirits of old their sudden gestures on the wind, when they stride, from blast to blast, along the dusky night. Often blended with the gale, to some warrior's grave, they roll the mist, a grey dwelling to his ghost, until the songs arise.²⁷

Macpherson attaches a long note to this passage, in which he explains both the medical atmospherics of Lego, and the legendary significance it apparently held for the Ossianic Celts:

The signification of Leigo [i.e. Lego] is, *the lake of disease*, probably so called, on account of the morasses that surround it. As the mist, which arose from the lake of Lego,

occasioned diseases and death, the bards feigned, as here, that it was the residence of the ghosts of the deceased, during the interval between their death and the pronouncing of the funeral elegy over their tombs; for it was not allowable without that ceremony was performed, for the spirits of the dead to mix with their ancestors, *in their airy halls*.
(*Fingal*, 117–9)

This note provides its readers with a dual perspective on Lego's mists: from a geographic and medical standpoint, they are invited to interpret the lake as a subject of miasmatic medicine, like the malarial swamps of Italy or the putrid English fens. However, in the world of the poems, this knowledge is codified as part of Ossian's ghostly epic machinery: either as a 'feigned' poetic fancy, or an article of traditional belief that is indulged by the feigning bards. The border between the medicalized and mythic is crossed in this imagined Ossianic age, and communication between environmental and cultural factors is dramatized both in the aerial presence of ghosts, and in the interaction of elegy and atmosphere.

Macpherson's comment about the purported power of bardic elegy, which can propel ghosts from the noxious environs of Lego to ancestral '*airy halls*', is not just a passing observation—it explains a major element in both the imagery and plotting of '*Temora*'. The danger of an unsung death is used repeatedly to underline the heroic code by which the epic's protagonists abide. Fingal declares in Book I that a 'little soul is a vapour that hovers round the marshy lake', whilst the prideful Foldath threatens Fingal with a song-less funeral: 'beside some fen shall his tomb be seen. It shall rise without a song. His ghost shall hover in mist over the reedy pool' (*Temora*, 23, 90). On more than one occasion, the necessity of singing an elegy over the dead becomes a motivating element in the epic narrative, as when Ossian is made to promise in Book II to arrange an elegy for Cairbar that will 'give his soul to the wind' (*Temora*, p. 43), or in Book III, when we hear of how the warrior Connal once risked his life to protect

his slain father Duth-caron, guarding the grave until a bard arrives to send his ghost to the upper atmosphere:

No lonely bard appeared, deep musing on the heath: and could Connal leave the tomb of his father, until he had received his fame? [. . .] Seven nights he laid his head on the tomb, and saw his father in his dreams. He saw him rolled dark in a blast, like the vapour of reedy Lego.— At length the steps of Colgan came, the bard of high Temora. Duth-caron received his fame, and brightened, as he rose on the wind. (*Temora*, 59–61)

This motif exemplifies the widespread Romantic-era trope of the aeriform poem, in which the poetic word becomes breath, and as breath enters the atmosphere like wind. However, it is a version of the trope that reaches beyond poetic metaphor—it is presented instead as a piece of pseudo-anthropological information, as though the metaphor had been an article of faith in some distant Celtic age. And given the explicitly miasmic nature of Macpherson's unsung souls, it also echoes eighteenth-century medical writing about the salubrious power of certain winds: take, for instance, Robert James's *Pharmacopoeia Universalis* (1747), which asserted that 'Winds purge the Air from the impurities it has contracted, and...correct that malignant Quality which it has acquired by Rest and Stagnation'. By providing elegiac 'Agitation...of the Atmosphere',²⁸ Macpherson's bards in *Temora* are maintaining a kind of Celtic cultural hygiene.

Having thus risen on bardic winds to the 'airy halls' of their fathers, *Temora*'s misty souls no longer seem to carry the same threat of contagion. In fact, Fingal informs his son in Book VIII that the spirits of well-praised ancestors can lend them support in their righteous wars:

My Fathers, Ossian, trace my steps; my deeds are pleasant to their eyes. Wherever I come forth to battle, on my field, are their columns of mist... Father of heroes, Trenmor, dweller of eddying winds! [. . .] Thee have I seen, at times, bright from between thy clouds; so appear to my son, when he is to lift the spear [. . .] (*Temora*, 149–50)

Ossian's mists, then, despite the miasmic forms they often take, are in fact a means by which the traditionary content of Celtic atmosphere can be made visible and useful for future generations. Far from being lost in the mists, the Fingalian Celts are actually nurtured and supported by their culture-stuffed vapours, just as the mists of the *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* help to produce beautiful and statuesque ancestors. In Macpherson's poetic texts, however, Celtic atmosphere is not just an environmental influence on Celtic culture: *Temora* in particular sets out a complex aerial ecosystem, in which cultural and environmental elements are fundamentally intertwined. And as it was bardic poetry that prevented the dead from lingering like miasmas amongst the living, Macpherson's system emphasizes the crisis that must have enveloped Celtic society 'after the bards were discontinued' (*Fingal*, xii): without salubrious gusts of bardic elegy, and in air thick with the spirits of unsung heroes, it is implied that Gaelic culture would soon begin to choke on its own fumes.

Therefore, although the mist that 'rests on the hills' of Morven helped to define a specific regional symbology for the Highlands, healthful circulation and communication are actually fundamental to its function. This communication, furthermore, is closely related to the concept of fame: 'giving' and 'receiving' fame are repeatedly used as synonyms for bardic elegy, the cultural feature that—within *Temora*'s medicalized aerography—prevents Celtic atmosphere from stagnating. At times this 'fame' appears to be of the inter-generational, intra-Gaelic variety—ancestral worship rather than literary celebrity—but in Macpherson's

‘Berrathon’, the dying Ossian imagines a form of airborne notoriety similar to his soon-to-be widespread renown:

But Ossian shall not long be alone, he sees the mist that shall receive his ghost. He beholds the mist that shall form his robe, when he appears on his hills. The sons of little men shall behold me, and admire the stature of the chiefs of old. They shall creep to their caves, and look to the sky with fear; for my steps shall be in the clouds, and darkness shall roll on my side. (*Fingal*, 267)

Ossian’s vaporous fame here is both highly located (‘on his hills’) and potentially boundless (‘my steps shall be in the clouds’): in this, it reflects preoccupations of the wider Celtic revivalism that Macpherson’s works helped to fuel. Much Romantic-era Celtic revivalism embodied a similar duality, concerned with defining localized Celtic atmospheres that emphasized the particularity of marginalized cultures, but also with the dissemination of those localized atmospheres to the outside world. In the absence of a traditional bardic order, Macpherson seems to have hoped that his ‘translations’ might provide the poetic wind necessary to air out the Scottish Gàidhealtachd: he was, however, not the only revivalist to present such work in an ambiguous light. Like the Ossian of ‘Berrathon’, Macpherson seems ultimately unsure whether his legacy would spread magic mist or rolling ‘darkness’.

‘Depression’s Mists’: The Atmosphere of the Welsh Revival

The first issue of the Welsh revivalist periodical *The Cambrian Register* (1796–1818) is enveloped in cloud like an Ossianic spirit. The illustrations on its title-page and frontispiece are both framed by billowing vapours, the former depicting a mist-shrouded *cromlech*, and the

latter an allegorical scene in which ‘HISTORY’ is directed towards a cloud-capped landscape ‘Emblematical of Wales [. . .] [in] ancient times’. There follows an ‘Introductory Ode’ by a ‘Mr. [Thomas] Ryder’, one of the few contemporary Welsh poems whose debt to Ossian is undisguised:²⁹ in it, a ‘proud bard’ longs to ‘gain the air’ like the dying Ossian, and the ‘terrific form’ of ‘Cambria’s genius rides amidst the storm’ like one of Macpherson’s ghosts.³⁰ The *Register*’s clouds, however, do not always reflect Ossianic vapour’s communicative potential: whereas Macpherson could imagine Celtic heritage being usefully disseminated in vaporous form, the guiding metaphor of this periodical is not the dissemination of vapours, but rather their dispersal. Everything is tied to the *Register*’s editorial mission statement—almost certainly authored by William Owen Pughe—which depicts Welsh antiquity as a ‘hidden repository’ soon to be ‘buried in oblivion’, which his periodical seeks to ‘bring to light’. Ryder’s ‘Introductory Ode’ translates this archaeological metaphor into aerial language, calling for the storm-clouds above Wales to ‘bid the curtain glide, / And cast your jetty locks aside’, so that Cambrian learning can ‘blossom to the skies’.³¹

Despite the echoes of Ossian, then, these Welsh clouds are unlike Macpherson’s more communicative vapours. Though they share with his mists a fashionably sublime glamour, and are clearly being used as a kind of vaporous Celtic branding, such atmospheres in the *Register* fundamentally symbolize barriers to the development of Celtic culture. And in another piece, written by the *eisteddfod*-poet and cleric Walter Davies, the clouds over Wales are given a specific historical context, tied closely to the conquest of Wales by England:

I must confess that the Welsh have not had such a spirit of enterprise to rouse their dormant powers into action. But the Scotch were never conquered by the English, consequently the energy of their character was never broken like that of the former. Vanquished and dejected, the natives of Cambria sunk into a mental listlessness; like

Israel in Babylon, they hung up the harp of science in despair. A combination of circumstances conspired to overcast Wales with a cloud of obscurity. Depression produces indolence, which becomes a parent of the most tyrannical of natural evils, poverty. (*Cambrian Register*, i. 282)

Davies' reference to 'Depression' here is interesting: in close proximity to the phrase 'cloud of obscurity', it evokes the word's meteorological sense, indicating a state of low air pressure linked to both airborne vapours and human 'languor' (Golinski, 152).³² However, the word is most clearly associated with the enlightenment-era historical discourse of 'national depression', in which nations that have been tyrannized or marginalized begin to languish on a societal level.³³ Davies' cloud is therefore medicalized much like Macpherson's mephitic vapours, but it does not emanate naturally from the Welsh soil or surround the souls of the Cambrian dead—he portrays it as an atmospheric imposition, placed upon Wales by external forces.

Such nation-obscuring vapours were an important organising metaphor for eighteenth-century Welsh revivalists, and in a political atmosphere unaffected by recent Jacobite rebellion, they were more willing than Macpherson to trace these atmospheres to an English source. An early example comes from the antiquarian, poet, and campaigner against clerical anglicisation Evan Evans (1732–88), who praises a Welsh-speaking member of the gentry for '*Yn wrol cais-ein arwedd / O niwl estroniaeth un wedd*' (Leading us in a brave effort / Out of the uniform mist of foreignness);³⁴ another comes from Iolo Morganwg, whose depiction of Oxford as a polluting manufactory is cited in this issue by Mary-Ann Constantine. As in Morganwg's text, these vapours often appeared in a politically radical context: they show up, for instance, in the radical-leaning Welsh-language periodicals *Y Cylch-grawn Cymraeg* (1793–4) and *Y Geirgrawn* (1796), symbolising both global tyranny and specifically Welsh neglect,³⁵ and are

echoed in the title of the first Welsh-language adaptation of Thomas Paine, which was called ‘*Seren Tan Gwmmwl*’, or ‘A Star Under a Cloud’.³⁶ It is possible to read some of *Ossian*’s vapours as an oblique comment on contemporary marginalisation of the Gàidhealtachd, but within Welsh revivalism, the politicized content of such imagery is often explicit.

Given the concurrency of this cloudy trope with more Ossianic and sublime mists, vapours in Romantic-era Welsh writing often become symbolically ambiguous. The mist-shrouded sublimity of the mountains was clearly a useful publicity tool for Cambrian revivalists, but even in works catering to a sublime-seeking touristic gaze, more stifling and politicized clouds are not wholly absent. Take, for instance, the topographic poem *Beaumaris Bay* (1800), written by the ‘humbly-born’ bard Richard Llwyd. At times, this work presents the thickly-condensed Welsh atmosphere as an aesthetic attraction, drawing the Muse to where ‘Her [i.e. Wales’s] hoary cliffs in wild confusion crowds, / And wraps their tow’ring summits in the clouds’ (*BBOP*, 2, ll. 29–30).³⁷ However, when Llwyd’s speaker imagines modern Welsh bards attempting to gain the air like their Ossianic ancestors, the mist that appears is neither sublime nor communicative:

Here too the Bards, when merit claimed the meed
 (The strain that gave to other days the deed)
 Invok’d the HILL [i.e. Snowdon], the verse inspiring spring,
 And quitted earth on rapture’s rising wing;
 Even now, unknown to cultivating care,
 Some *genial plant* may feel the chilling air,
 May bud, unseen, the village oak beneath,
 Or bloom, unheeded, on the barren heath:
 And though its Tints Depression’s mists may shroud

Some beam may yet pervade th'incumbent cloud [. . .]

(*BBOP*, 36–37, ll. 299–308)

An allusion to Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' is clear in Llwyd's vocabulary, but his mist does not emanate from that source: it is a distant descendant of the 'sanguine cloud' of conquest in Gray's pseudo-historical 'The Bard', and (more specifically) a cousin to the contemporary revivalist vapours discussed above.³⁸ Llwyd had connections to many of the Welsh authors previously quoted: he had, for instance, already dedicated poems to members of a London-Welsh society associated with the *Cambrian Register*, and his choice of language here is clearly redolent of Walter Davies' depressive cloud in that publication.³⁹ A few lines later, Llwyd's speaker might recommend that 'Sons on the World, from busy towns' should come to Wales to 'greet Hygeia in untainted air' (*BBOP*, 37, ll. 311–12), but the humble Welsh poet himself breathes in an atmosphere that is much less salubrious, laden with mists whose 'Depression' is not just meteorological and medical, but also specific to his class and culture. In selling Welsh antiquity and Celtic peripherality to an anglophone audience, Welsh revivalists traded on some of the more attractive and marketable qualities of Celtic atmosphere; but their clouds could also become an aerial Anglo-Celtic border, separating cultures in contrasting states of health.

Conclusion: 'Upon The Breath of Popular Applause'

The difference between Samuel Johnson's 1775 dismissal of airborne Ossianic Celticity and Wordsworth's attack on the same target in his *Poems* of 1815 attests the consolidation of Celtic atmosphere in the intervening period. Wordsworth could no longer brush off this phenomenon

by consigning it to the air, and had to acknowledge that—despite its ‘thin Consistence’—it was now a continent-enveloping cloud:

All hail Macpherson! Hail to thee, sire of Ossian! The Phantom was begotten by the snug embrace of an impudent Highlander upon a cloud of tradition—it travelled south-ward, where it was greeted with acclamation, and the thin Consistence took its course through Europe, upon the breath of popular applause.⁴⁰

Wordsworth’s Celtic air is no longer defined purely by the absence of solidity, as in Johnson, but instead by the presence of a powerful and distorting contaminant, one that prevents the observer from directly perceiving reality:

In nature every thing is distinct, yet nothing is defined into absolute independent singleness. In Macpherson’s work it is exactly the reverse; every thing (that is not stolen) is in this manner defined, insulated, dislocated, deadened,—yet nothing distinct. It will always be so when words are substituted for things. (*Poems*, i. 364)

This kind of attack on Celtic mistiness has become a well-worn commonplace: Celtic vapours, though acclaimed by a wide audience, are a barrier to clear-sighted perception of things as they are, obscuring the real until there is ‘nothing distinct’. However, in this article I have demonstrated that although Romantic-era Celtic atmosphere nurtured its share of distortions, it was undoubtedly constructed in response to contemporary realities: in conversation with medicalized enlightenment-era atmospherics, the misty language of Celtic revivalism was used to express authors’ hopes and fears about the marginalized yet increasingly sought-out cultures to which they belonged. In the trope’s more pessimistic iterations, such vapours became the

stagnant miasmas of cultural decline, or clouds of oppressive regional marginalisation. More optimistically, revivalists could imagine nurturing clouds of culture rising from the Celtic soil, being circulated by bardic song, and (in the new revivalist climate) dispersing Celtic fame into the atmosphere. In all these cases, what is at stake is the ability of particularized Celtic airs to interact with wider all-sustaining aerial systems—these clouds condense along fronts that distinguish the Celtic fringes from the public sphere.

Significantly, from Macpherson to Johnson, and from the *Cambrian Register* to Wordsworth, the content of these Celtic vapours is often not just broadly cultural, but specifically linguistic. The idealized airborne poetry of Macpherson's Celtic past is, in this sense, not dissimilar to Johnson's floating 'Earse', or the Celtic mist that arises for Wordsworth 'when words are substituted for things'. The latter Wordsworthian formulation is particularly apposite, because it foregrounds the extent to which these Celtic vapours are metaphors of linguistic mediation, symbolising the translation and transfer of Celtic 'things'—and often specifically Celtic words—to audiences in England and beyond. In a recent discussion of atmospheric mediation in Romantic poetry, Thomas Ford has cited Locke's dictum that words are like the airy '*Medium* through which visible objects pass', because 'their Obscurity and Disorder does not seldom cast a Mist before our Eyes'.⁴¹ No wonder, then, that the natural-truth-seeking Wordsworth finds Macpherson especially disorientating, because his 'translations' are not merely words substituted for things, but English words substituted for Gaelic words that—for the most part—were never really there.

Even in less deceptive situations, however, the mediation of Celtic meaning across an Anglo-Celtic language barrier could produce cloudy imprecision, something that paradoxically heightened rather than obscured the impression of Celtic cultural specificity. Take, for instance, Richard Llwyd's proud assertion that a Welsh poem had 'such bewitching words, as set all translation at defiance' (*BBOP*, 132), or Dorothy Wordsworth's much-quoted description of a

Scottish herder among ‘mists...on the hill sides’, who calls to his cows with a ‘half-articulate Gaelic hooting’. The linguistic content of the latter’s call is so indistinct that Wordsworth cannot even tell if it is fully ‘articulate’, and yet contextually this somehow emphasizes her sense that it is prototypically ‘Gaelic’, to the extent that the misty scene embodies ‘the whole history of the Highlander’s life’.⁴² Such forms of inter-linguistic mediation were deemed necessary—by Celtic-speakers and anglophones alike—for maintaining the cultural health of Celtic communities in the Romantic era, but revivalism’s thickly visible vapours drew attention to the simultaneous imperfection and allure of such mediation. Romantic-era Celtic culture was carried beyond its boundaries ‘on the breath of Popular Applause’, but both its proponents and its detractors realized that—for the most part—it could still only be seen through a mist.

NOTES

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¹ ‘AIR [. . .] 5. Any thing light or uncertain ; that is as light as air’. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (2 vols, London, 1755), i. s.v. ‘AIR.’.

² Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* (London, 1775), 186, 89.

³ J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘English and Welsh’, in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* (London, 1983), 162–97, 172.

⁴ Somhairle MacGill-eain/Sorley MacLean, ‘Realism in Gaelic Poetry’, in *Ris a’ Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean* (Stornoway, 1985), 15–47, 20, 46.

⁵ Celtic mistiness remains a much used—and implicitly pejorative—trope in more recent academic writing. See, for instance, Ina Ferris on Sydney Owenson’s mature

‘embarrassment’ with the “‘misty” Celticism’ of *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), or Paul Russell on misleading approaches to Welsh and Irish legal tradition that ‘shroud it in a “Celtic mist”’. Ina Ferris, ‘The Irish Novel, 1800–1829’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, ed. Richard Maxwell and Katie Trumpener (Cambridge, 2008), 235–49, 241; Paul Russell, ‘The Languages and Registers of Law in Medieval Ireland and Wales’, in *Law and Language in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jenny Benham, Matthew McHaffie and Helle Vogt (Leiden, 2018), 83–103, 83, 86.

⁶ The most theoretically engaged treatment of Ossianic mist is that by Dafydd Moore, who interprets it as both a polite screen for violent acts, and an instance of the Burkean sublime. See Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson’s The Poems of Ossian* (Aldershot, 2003), 114. A more passing yet important suggestion was put forward by Joep Leerssen, who links mists to the concept of liminality and to the Gaelic *aisling* tradition (a hint later picked up by Murray Pittock). See Joep Leerssen, ‘Ossianic Liminality: Between Native Tradition and Preromantic Taste’, in *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, ed. Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskill (Amsterdam, 1998), 1–16, 14; Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford, 2008), 77.

⁷ For a more positive consideration of the relationship between Macpherson and Scottish Gaelic culture, see Donald Meek, ‘The Sublime Gael: The Impact of Macpherson’s *Ossian* on Literary Creativity and Cultural Perception in Gaelic Scotland’, in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Howard Gaskill (London, 2004), 40–66.

⁸ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (2 vols, London, 1791), i. 245.

⁹ For a succinct overview, see Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2003), 111–21. For the significance of tour literature, see *Enlightenment Travel and British Identities: Thomas Pennant’s Tours in Scotland and Wales*, ed. Mary-Ann Constantine and

Nigel Leask (London, 2017), 1–14. For the Celtic in British culture, see Murray Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester, 1999).

¹⁰ Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Air's Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660–1794* (Chicago, 2012).

¹¹ See in particular Jan Golinski, *British Weather and the Climate of Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2007), 137–202. For challenges to climatic determinism, see Lewis, *Air's Appearance*, 27. For continuing Hippocratic influence in the late-eighteenth century 'physico-geographical' thought of Herder, see John K. Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics Against Imperialism* (Toronto, 2015), 215–18.

¹² See, for instance, Thomas Newenham, *A Statistical and Historical Inquiry into the Progress and Magnitude of the Population of Ireland* (London, 1805), 29–30.

¹³ James Johnson, *A Tour in Ireland: With Meditations and Reflections* (London, 1844), p. 97.

¹⁴ Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, ed. Lewis M. Knapp (Oxford, 2009), iii. 240.

¹⁵ Edward Jones, *Musical and Poetic Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (London, 1784), 28.

¹⁶ John Arbuthnot, *An Essay Concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies* (London, 1733), 206, 3, 149.

¹⁷ Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988), 24–39.

¹⁸ *The Philosophical Orations of Thomas Reid: Delivered at Graduation Ceremonies in King's College Aberdeen*, trans. Shirley Darcus Sullivan (Carbondale, 1989), 36.

¹⁹ James Macpherson, *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1771), 209–11.

²⁰ Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian the Son Fingal* (London, 1763), 55–6.

²¹ James Macpherson, *Fragments of Ancient Scottish Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1760), 13–15. It is worth comparing ‘Fragment II’ to a section of the widely attested Gaelic poem ‘*Óran na Comhachaig*’, in which the speaker laments that ‘there is nothing left but the mist’ of his dead companions. See William Gillies, ‘Gun ann ach an céo “Nothing Left But Their Mist”: Farewell and Elegy in Gaelic Poetry’, in *Older Scots Literature*, ed. Sally Mapstone (Edinburgh, 2005), 370–96, 371.

²² Robert Blair, *The Grave. A Poem* (London, 1743), 20. For Macpherson’s emulation of Blair, see *Ossian Revisited*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1991), 166, 188.

²³ *An Lasair: An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Scottish Gaelic Verse*, ed. Ronald Black (Edinburgh, 2001), 192–200; *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*, ed. Neil Ross (Edinburgh, 1939), 100–1. For Macpherson’s (probably inexpert) use of the *Book of the Dean*, see Derick S. Thomson, ‘MacPherson’s Ossian: Ballads to Epics’, *Béaloides*, 54/55 (1986/87), 243–64.

²⁴ *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science, and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland*, ed. Michael Hunter (Woodbridge, 2001), 77, 79, 85.

²⁵ James Macpherson, *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem... Together with Several Other Poems*, 2nd edn (London, 1762), 146. Pope’s ‘Auster’ is the South Wind.

²⁶ See Peta Mitchell, *Contagious Metaphor* (London, 2012), 47–8.

²⁷ James Macpherson, *Temora: An Ancient Epic Poem in Eight Books* (London, 1763), 117–9.

²⁸ Robert James, *Pharmacopoeia Universalis: Or A New Universal English Dispensary* (London, 1747), 12–13.

²⁹ For the hostile Welsh reception to Ossian, see Mary-Ann Constantine, ‘Ossian in Wales and Brittany’, in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Howard Gaskill (London, 2004), 67–90.

³⁰ *The Cambrian Register*, 1 (1796), i–xii. For an edited version of Ryder’s poem, see *English Language Poetry from Wales, 1789–1806*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards (Cardiff, 2013), 151–4.

³¹ The intended addressee of these lines is not especially clear, but one possible reading is that they are directed towards the storm-borne Cambrian genius invoked in the first stanza of Ryder’s ‘Introductory Ode’—who might also be the ‘*Daughter of dark*’ referred to in the second.

³² For an explicit eighteenth-century link between low air pressure, lassitude, and vapours, see John Phelps, *The Human Barometer* (London, 1734), 15.

³³ See Lord Kames on Rome-controlled Greece in *Sketches on the History of Man* (Edinburgh, 1774), ii. 155, or Thomas Somerville on seventeenth-century Scotland in *The History of Great Britain During the Reign of Queen Anne* (London, 1798), 147.

³⁴ *Gwaith y Parchedig Evan Evans*, ed. D. Silvan Evans (Caernarfon, 1876), 43. Translations from Welsh are by R. Kaminski-Jones.

³⁵ For the former see *Welsh Responses to the French Revolution: Press and Public Discourse, 1789–1802* (Cardiff, 2012) ed. Marion Löffler, 190, 192. For the latter, see *Y Geirgrawn*, 4 (July 1796), 169.

³⁶ For an edition and translation, see *Political Pamphlets and Sermons from Wales, 1790–1806*, ed. Marion Löffler (Cardiff, 2014), 111–57.

³⁷ *Beaumaris Bay and Other Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards (Nottingham, 2016). For Llwyd’s self-construction as a ‘humbly-born Bard’, see xi–xvi.

³⁸ *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray: English, Latin and Greek* ed. H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford, 1966), 23, 39.

³⁹ See *Chester Chronicle*, 3rd June 1791; *Chester Chronicle*, 30th December 1796.

⁴⁰ William Wordsworth, 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface', in *Poems* (2 vols, London, 1815), i. 341–75, 363.

⁴¹ Quoted in Thomas H. Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air* (Cambridge, 2018), 73–4.

⁴² *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, ed. Carol Kyros Walker (New Haven and London, 1997), 114.