

2015 Richard Popkin Research Report

I write to report upon the research accomplished with the support of a Richard H. Popkin Research Travel Grant, awarded by the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) in March, 2015. This spring, I travelled to Gainesville, Florida to consult the records of George Johnstone, governor of British West Florida from 1763-1767. Britain acquired West Florida from the Spanish in 1763, as a result of the Seven Years' War, and the colony was a volatile mix of black slaves, European settlers, and Native American groups. James Macpherson, the "translator" of Ossian, held a post as secretary to Governor Johnstone 1764-66, when Britain's presence was still being firmly established in the Floridas. In 1760s, Thomas Jefferson, living in Virginia, tried to write Macpherson to ask about Ossian, but ended up directing the letter to James' cousin Charles Macpherson, most likely because he had no idea where to direct the letter in West Florida. Given the care with which Macpherson's life has been chronicled by Fiona Stafford, Paul J. deGatigno, and others, the lack of information about Macpherson's time in the Americas intrigued me. More specifically, I was curious to see how Macpherson's career compiling Ossian influenced his experience of Florida, and how his experience of Florida influenced his later career as a Jacobite historian. In Gainesville, I worked with two librarians—Jim Cusick and Michele Wilbanks—who helped me find the microfilm rolls that matched up with the records at the Colonial Office in the United Kingdom. I took 1,000 digital images from CO 5/574 and 5/575. I am still going through the images, but I have taken upon myself nonetheless to report what I have found so far.

In CO 5/574, I found one letter that is actually signed "James Macpherson." In it, he asks for permission to "make his case" for additional funds, arguing that his salary is not adequate for the position he was assigned. The letter is February 3, 1766. Macpherson would not be in West Florida for very much longer, and indeed Governor Johnstone would also be reassigned soon after that. Macpherson's handwriting is very distinctive—I have enclosed an image for you to see—with his lowercase d's being drawn into a curlicue shape above the line of text. Governor Johnstone's handwriting tends to be less elegant, but every once in a while, a letter signed "George Johnstone" appears in Macpherson's handwriting. As secretary, it seems Macpherson may have transcribed Johnstone's letters at the governor's behest, or even taken upon himself to compose original documents and affix the governor's name to the page.

The possibility that Macpherson, in keeping the records or "history" of colonial transactions in West Florida, managed to write himself *out* of history, is intriguing, and it also fits with what we know of Macpherson in the first, Ossianic phase of his career. In her Macpherson biography *The Sublime Savage*, Fiona Stafford has written about how the Scottish literati were, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, derided by the English as ambitious "place-seekers" who gave each other lucrative positions. The irony of Macpherson's career, though, is that his major act of self-promotion—the production of the Ossian translations—required him to *deny* any role he might have had as an original author or poet. From a literary point-of-view, Macpherson could be seen as working in the tradition of "truth-claims" made by Daniel Defoe and other writers who claimed merely to be editors or transcribers of other people's stories. From an historical point-of-view, Macpherson's disappearing act highlights the importance of "reading against the grain" when researching colonial archives.

So far, this archive trip has been fruitful in that it has gotten me to reconsider the nature of Macpherson's literary celebrity, and also consider how he takes a similar role as an invisible author of the colonial record. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Thank you.