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# TELLING TALES

A HISTORY OF LITERARY HOAXES

MELISSA  
KATSOULIS

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# *Telling Tales*

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A HISTORY OF LITERARY HOAXES



by

MELISSA KATSOULIS

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## For Rosalind Adams: mother, friend, investor

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# INTRODUCTION

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FROM DISGRUNTLED MORMONS and fake Native Americans to bored students and lustful aristocrats the bizarre history of literary hoaxers is every bit as revealing as the orthodox roll-call of Western writers, as is their acute appreciation of what inspires, frightens and resonates with their generation. And their stories are often incredibly funny, too.

This history of the most notable literary hoaxes does not claim to be comprehensive: some well-loved tricksters such as Henry Root and Rochester Sneath have been left out because they seem, on reflection, to be more practical jokers than true hoaxers. Others, like Thomas J. Wise and James Collier, are not included because their rather pedestrian projects must be called forgeries rather than hoaxes. And although it begins in the eighteenth century – the age of the novel and the era when being a publisher or author offered, for the first time, a real chance at what Samuel Johnson called ‘the fever of renown’ – cases of writers playing games with authorship and authenticity can be traced as far back as the fourth century BC.

Some were hoaxing for their own amusement, as was the case with the philosopher known as Dionysius the Renegade, the earliest hoaxer literary history records. He was the spirited rebel Stoic who, after breaking away from the school which had raised him to believe in the nobility of pain and suffering, manufactured a fake Sophocles play called *Parthenopaeus* and inserted into it a number of insulting acrostics including ‘HERACLIDES IS IGNORANT OF LETTERS AND IS NOT ASHAMED OF HIS IGNORANCE’.

Others, such as the unknown author of the famous *Donation of Constantine*, hoaxed for political gain: that two-part document comprising the *Confessio* and *Donatio* which was inserted into a twelfth-century book of canonical law purported to confirm the Emperor Constantine’s gift of European dominion to the church in return for Pope Sylvester curing him of leprosy and revealing to him Christ’s love.

To understand the significance of the stories collected here (most of which can and should be read as much for sheer amusement at the amazing lengths to which people will go to practise a deception and the sheer nonsense gullible readers are willing to swallow, as for literary-historical edification) it is useful to consider the three main types of hoax, and the thorny subject of truth-telling in literature more generally.

Not all hoaxes are equal and although the ones chosen for inclusion in this book are arranged chronologically within chapters, they might just as easily have been broken down into the three distinct groups that most hoaxes can be said to fall into. The American academic Brian McHale, one of the surprisingly few literary theorists to attempt a comprehensive taxonomy of the written hoax, has identified these groups as: the genuine hoax, the entrapment hoax and the mock hoax.

Into the first group fall the majority of examples, and nearly all of the very famous ones. The Hitler Diaries, the Ossian poems, William Ireland’s Shakespeare papers and the *Donation of Constantine* can all be given McHale’s playfully oxymoronic label ‘genuine hoax’ because they are dishonest literary creations which are intended never to be exposed. They might be done for reasons of financial



ideological or emotional gain, but they are neither self-conscious works of art nor are they intended to poke fun at specific individuals or institutions. The perpetrators of these hoaxes tend to be unfortunate creatures who have been unable to find success with their legitimate works and who are desperate either for the money or recognition that literary success can bring. The eighteenth century's William Ireland is a prime example: he was a boy growing up in London amidst the 1790s frenzy for collecting and classifying European cultural artefacts. Studiously ignored by his bibliophile father, he was considered dim and hopeless and forced into a humble clerking job which he hated. Yet on the day he first presented his Shakespeare-obsessed parent with a piece of paper purporting to bear the bard's signature, all his life's problems began to evaporate. Overnight, he became the focus of his father's undivided attention, praised for his brilliance in sourcing and negotiating deals for the series of Shakespearean papers he was secretly producing using antique paper and specially mixed ink.

The main reason for Ireland's eventual undoing was that he was not a skilled enough writer to convince critics that his 'discovered' works were genuine. Other pliers of 'genuine hoaxes', however, were such skilled stylists that their work has continued to be held in high regard even after debunking and death. Thomas Chatterton's Rowley poems and the bardic verses by Macpherson are both cases in point, and continue to be read and studied today as worthwhile creations in their own right; and particularly in the case of Chatterton, the ill-fated young medievalist from Bristol who came to London to seek his fortune but fell victim to poverty and desperation before his talents could out, the high romance of the hoaxer's real-life story has proved irresistible to future generations. Of all the hoaxers who have caught the imagination of later writers (Ern Malley and Anthony Godby Johnson's appearance in novels by Peter Carey and Armistead Maupin being other examples) the life of Chatterton has continued to inspire great secondary works of art by authors from John Keats to Peter Ackroyd.

Perhaps the boldest 'genuine hoax' is one of the least known, and dates from fifteenth-century Italy. It involves a monk called Annius from Viterbo, near Rome, who so loved his hometown that he stopped at nothing to prove his patriotism – not at planting faked Etruscan fragments of pottery in his neighbour's earth, not at claiming to have discovered hugely significant lost writings by the early religious writer Berosus which claimed that Viterbo was where Noah's offspring first repopulated the world with Aryans after the flood. Nearly a century later his hoaxes were debunked, using the same new forensic critical techniques which exposed the *Donation of Constantine*: careful line-by-line analysis of vocabulary, orthography and parallel texts. And no small amount of common sense.

Chatterton and his ilk might be tragic figures, but the second group of hoaxers has left a body of work more likely to inspire glee than sympathy. These are the people whose intention is to lure a particular academic, publisher or literary community with a prank text and then reveal (often through clues planted in the manuscript itself) how stupid its readers were to believe it – and, by extension, how clever the hoaxer was to trick them. The most famous hoax in Australia – and indeed in twentieth-century English-language poetry in general – was the invented oeuvre of Ern Malley, secretly written by a pair of disgruntled young traditional poets, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, who claimed at the time to have dashed off the ultra-modernist poems in an afternoon. (They almost certainly did not, and ironically are now considered to have produced some of their best work under the Malley name.) They were neither the first nor last group of twentieth-century writers to create bogus texts to make a dismissive point about the cultural fads of their day, and all of their ilk reveal as much about their target audience as they do about themselves. Particularly the Spectra poetry hoax of 1916 (the motivation behind which was similar to McAuley and Stewart's) and the superbly awful erotic novel *Naked Came the Stranger* in 1969, which set out to prove that as long as a book was fu

of sex it need have no literary merit to succeed. And it is not only lovers of fashionable fiction who get pricked by the hoaxer's barb: when the physicist Alan Sokal successfully submitted a paper composed of pseudo-sociological gibberish to a leading cultural studies journal in the mid-1990s, it proved spectacularly that the entrapment hoax was alive and well. Then, in 2006, the official biographer of John Betjeman hid the immortal words 'A N WILSON IS A SHIT' in a fake Betjeman love letter which he submitted to his rival biographer under the anagrammatic name 'Eve de Harber' which was blithely included in the first edition of Wilson's work on the poet. The entrapment hoaxes, although deliberately bringing disrepute to fellow professionals, are certainly some of the most fun to read, and constitute an un-sobering reminder of the value of play and theatre in the often self-important business of publishing and academia.

The final group is also the smallest, but that may not be the case forever. 'Mock hoaxes' are those in which a genuinely experimental writer plays conscious tricks with the very notion of authorship to create a voice which is neither quite theirs nor someone else's. It is the kind of literary ventriloquism we see in the work of Fern Gravel, the ten-year-old girl-poet who gained a cult following in mid-twentieth-century America but was, in truth, an ageing, male writer of adventure stories; the Canadian poet who could only cure his writer's block by adopting the persona of a grizzled Greek fisherman called Karavis; and the eccentric academic almost certainly behind the controversial Hiroshima witness poetry submitted to literary journals under the name Yasusada.

'Mock hoaxes' are often highly literary because they are executed by experienced writers with a genuine artistic end in mind. James Norman Hall, the creator of Fern Gravel, for example, was intent on finding a new, softer outlet for a narrative voice honed on adventure stories and wartime memoirs. He believed passionately in the value of the work that his alter-ego was producing and, although it was childish and unsophisticated, critics agree that there is something more substantial than mere charm in Fern's melancholic coming-of-age poems. Of course, not every hoax fits neatly into only one of McHale's three categories, but his groupings do help to identify the main reasons why the peculiar and often underrated writers whose stories are told in these pages did what they did.

From the aristocratic sex addict who wrote outrageous things about the empress Cixi in *fin de siècle* Shanghai to the lonely middle-aged lady who invented for herself a dying, memoir-writing so that all human life is here, and the one thing they nearly all have in common is that they are writing from the margins. Even if they have had a materially privileged start in life or are possessed of a sharp intelligence, at some point each hoaxer has been made to feel excluded from the world they would like to be part of. An astonishing number of them were missing a parent. Most had once been praised for their literary abilities, but had failed to find success by conventional means. And almost all have a community – real or imagined – whose ways and boundaries they are seeking to protect in their writings. The 'entrapment hoaxers' try to safeguard what they see as the authentic values of their social or academic kin against attacks from new-fangled trends. The 'genuine hoaxers' seek a way to make an imagined world seem real enough for the reading public to buy into. And for those post-modern experimentalists who produce 'mock hoaxes', even their hyper-identity as a writer is meant to be included in the 'reality' of their text.

Reality itself becomes a problem, however, the further one looks into these texts and the more one asks of literature as a gate-keeper of truth. The assumption that some kinds of writing are truer than others is not as straightforward as it might sound. Can it categorically be said that novels are untrue and memoirs are true? Surely not, as anyone who has basked in the wisdom of a great work of art (written, painted or played) will know that the only way to convey what it is like to be alive is to conjure something aesthetically complex enough to approximate to our experience of reality. Because

reality, after all, is nothing if not a mystery. Writers of memoir, biography and straight non-fiction have a more tenuous claim on the faithful transmission of truth than might at first be supposed because stories about people, places and events can only ever be passed down through the imperfect partial minds of others.

A recent example of the memoirist's art coming under theoretical and popular scrutiny is the infamous American author James Frey, whose bestselling book *A Million Little Pieces* claimed to tell the true, harrowing tale of his descent into drug and alcohol abuse and his remarkable self-guided recovery. The book was a huge success on publication in the US in 2003, and the author was held up by Oprah Winfrey as a beacon for others on the road to recovery. Frey's writing style was spare and seemingly immensely candid and instantly readable, and he told stories of extreme physical and mental hardship. Much of what he wrote seemed almost too intense to be true, and indeed it was. But when he was had up for fabricating portions of the book, he argued that the essence of the thing was absolutely real and he had merely changed certain details to better convey the truth of what happened and to protect the other people involved. There were also rumours of Frey first submitting his manuscript as fiction but being advised that a 'misery memoir' would sell better . . .

The rise and rise of the late-twentieth-century genre known as 'misery memoir' is a peculiarity of contemporary publishing which deserves a closer look, not least because the popularity of books with titles like *Please, Daddy, No!* say a great deal about who we are as readers and what makes us so susceptible to hoaxing. Uplifting stories of personal hardship are clearly very appealing to us and always have been. The defining story of the Christian age gives a clue as to how much we need to witness the pain of others, and as well as the Bible's cast of auxiliary sufferers (Job, Noah et al) most other religions have their own fables about people or gods enduring trials and difficult journeys. Classical tragedians responded to this, understanding the value of catharsis in such tales, and in English literature from Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton to Bunyan, Defoe and Dickens, there has been a steady stream of popular fiction about men whose physical and mental realities are defined by punishment or abuse. It was not until the twentieth century and the emergence of modern publishing, however, that the idea of actually faking 'real' bad experiences took hold.

The now-forgotten hoaxer Joan Lowell in 1920s New York fooled the publishers Simon & Schuster into believing she had been the sole female on a years-long merchant seamen's voyage and as a result engaged in all manner of unladylike acts. Other phoney memoirists, like the pseudonymous Cleo Knox with her faux-eighteenth century *Diary of a Young Lady of Fashion* or the 'Anonymous' author of the cult drug-diary *Go Ask Alice* who turned out to be a middle-aged Mormon with an axe to grind hid behind their lurid creations until they could no longer sustain the deceit.

Pretending to have been involved in illicit escapades as a teenage girl hardly compares to the most shocking subsection of fake memoirists, the Holocaust pretenders: Benjamin Wilkomirski, Mishka Defonseca, Herman Rosenblat and Helen Demidenko each had different reason for pretending to have been a victim – or in Demidenko's case, supporter – of Hitler's regime. Surprisingly, what can be pieced together of their 'real' true stories often reveals biographies which were every bit as full of adventure, sacrifice and passion as their assumed selves, only without the massively emotive significance of Nazism.

The second most fascinating question after 'Why lie about the Holocaust?' is 'Why are there so many hoaxers from Australia?' It is true that given the young age and small literary community of that country, a wholly disproportionate number of writers have made their name there on the basis of dishonest claims about authorship. Just as hoaxing says something about what writing is for, so Australia tells us an important truth about hoaxing. In the literary trickery of writers like Mar

Morgan, Nino Culotta and Wanda Koolmatrie we see the bare ambition of the hoaxer writ large and made simple. For Wanda, an unpublished white man writing as an indigenous Australian woman, it was an anxiety about nationhood and immigration that made him submit his phoney manuscript. Nino Culotta's motivation was similar but less angry: he, another white Australian writing as a foreigner (this time an Italian builder) wanted to tell some quirky truths about the closed world of the working-class Australian male and saw that his best way of doing so was in the guise of an outsider looking in. Marlo Morgan and Norma Khouri are interesting cases because both are American but have used the belief that Australia is in some way cut off from the rest of the global cultural community to forge a career in illicit memoir writing. Morgan's bestselling *Mutant Message Down Under* was based on her alleged experiences with a lost group of wandering Aborigines who cured her sickness and made her an honorary member of their tribe. She never dared publish her far-fetched story in Australia but when some Indigenous readers got hold of it and balked at her lack of knowledge and offensive claims about their people she was forced publicly to apologize. Khouri wrote about experiencing the honour killing of her best friend in the Middle East and claimed she had moved to rural Australia to escape the threats of the Jordanians who were seeking revenge on her for speaking out about their crimes.

Of course, the fact that both these women's hoaxes were exposed by Australian investigation proves that that country is nothing like the intellectual black hole they narrow-mindedly assumed it to be; but it does suggest that the Antipodean creative scene allows things to happen that other countries might not. One important reason for that is that racism and far-right politics is less taboo there than in other parts of the English-speaking world (a fact that the outspoken comments of the Nazi-hoaxer Helen Darville/Demidenko prove beyond doubt). Another is perhaps that in a young culture where identities are still in flux and anxieties about racial integration abound, there is a desperation to prove – and believe – certain emotive points about how to live, and literature is the best way to do it.

In the future, technological developments will undoubtedly change the way hoaxes are perpetrated and received. The internet has played a vital role in the debunking of all the hoaxes of the last ten years, but it will also enable writers of far less ingenuity and skill to pull off increasingly audacious deceptions. Fake blogs, such as the long-running one by an American girl supposedly suffering from terminal illness who turned out to be the fantasy of an unhappy middle-aged woman, may become more widespread. And in the 'mock hoax' category, the UK novelist is not alone who recently set up a detailed fake internet profile for his pseudonymous memoir's 'author' to throw readers off the scent of the fact that the real writer was not the dissolute, wine-loving *littérateur* described on the book jacket but a rather unassuming writer of genre fiction: increasingly, publishers encourage authors to use the internet as a tool for making their artful voices seem real, thus blurring the line between truth and fiction even more.

The way we use literature to communicate will change in unimaginable ways, but it will also stay the same. Books – whatever form they take – will always ask us to enter into a contract of trust with them. For as long as there are publishers to bestow upon an author the incredible power of seeing their work in print, there will be writers who abuse, pervert and wilfully misconstrue the printed word. But you only have to read the stories of fantastic literary hoaxers like Grey Owl or Romain Gary to know that the world would be a much duller place without them.

# THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY



## WILLIAM LAUDER

NOT MUCH IS known of the early life of the angry young Scotsman William Lauder, least of all his date or place of birth. What is known is that ever since meeting with an unfortunate golfing accident on the Bruntsfield Links just outside Edinburgh, which led to the amputation of one of his legs in the early 1730s, he became a bitter and resentful man with ‘a sallow complexion and rolling fiery eyes’, hell-bent on stirring up trouble and knocking down literary icons. The accident (in which he took a rogue ball to the knee, causing an injury which, due to lack of proper care, went septic) was only the first of a series of disappointments which led him to turn his talents to a most audacious hoax, and one which, if it had succeeded, would have ruined the reputation of the finest religious poet in the world, John Milton.

Lauder’s talents were undeniable. Always a keen scholar, he had been taken on after graduating from Edinburgh University as an assistant teacher to his ailing master, Professor Adam Watt, in 1733. Trusted to teach Latin to Watt’s students, he assumed he would take over his position after the old man died, but in fact was passed over after his superiors decided he was too inexperienced for the job. He also seems to have been someone whom it was difficult to get on with, judging by the total lack of kind words from his contemporaries. Accounts of his difficult personality abound in the conscientiously kept diaries and correspondences of mid-eighteenth-century Edinburghians, including his colleague, the well-known classicist Thomas Ruddiman, who recalled being ‘so sensible of the weakness and folly of that man, that I shunned his company, as far as decently I could’.

Reduced to applying for non-academic positions, he sought a job at the University Library but that too was unsuccessful, so instead he decided on a career in the publishing and translating of holy Latin texts. In 1739 he worked on a book of religious poetry with Ruddiman which not only got published but was recommended for use in schools, and buoyed by this success he managed to amass enough references to support an application to the faculty of religious history at the university, but it was alas, turned down. On receiving this bad news, he flew into an indignant rage and fled, as did so many others before and since, to London, where he felt sure his talents would be recognized.

Perhaps, even with his awkward personality, he could have made it as a *littérateur* if he had not become gripped by what was, according to his peers, an unquenchable obsession with doing down Milton. Although universally praised as a poet of genius, there was at that time a strong vein of antipathy to Milton’s republican politics, and one of the chief proponents of this was Samuel Johnson, who would become awkwardly entangled in Lauder’s hoax. Lauder’s theory was this: that Milton had drawn so closely on other contemporary religious sources for his great work *Paradise Lost* that it was only a matter of time he were outed as a fake. As evidence for this claim he cited a series of passages, which he had translated (badly) to seem almost identical to verses of Milton’s, from a range of not very well known

Latin works such as *Adamus Exul* by Hugo Grotius, *Sarcotis* by Jacob Masen and even the Scottish writers Andrew Ramsay and Alexander Ross.

All this evidence was described by Lauder in a submission to the *Gentleman's Magazine* and initially, at least, it was accepted by his readers, including Johnson, who was happy to be associated with the young Milton sceptic. However, on closer inspection the passages Lauder had cited as lifted from others' works were found either to be such bad translations as to be effectively made-up, or copied from a Latin version of the very Milton text it was supposed to be exposing.

One reader of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Reverend Richard Richardson, wrote a letter to the editor in January 1749 pointing out that some of the passages Lauder claimed to be from Grotius were in fact from William Hog's Latin translation of *Paradise Lost*, and others were nowhere to be found at all. But it was Dr John Douglas, later Bishop of Bath (although at that time a not very committed churchman) who spent the season in London hob-nobbing with fashionable bookmen, who ultimately confirmed the hoax. Johnson immediately reneged on his support of the thesis, admitting he had been duped, but claiming that it only happened because of his 'thinking the man too frantic to be fraudulent'.

However, Lauder was unwilling to go quietly and immediately set about publishing a rebuttal of the accusations made against him, producing, in 1750, his essay 'On Milton's use and imitation of the moderns, in his *Paradise Lost*'. But with the whole of literary London on his tail, and his excitable and increasingly bizarre accusations against Milton beginning to make him look quite mad, he wrote a letter of apology to Douglas (on Johnson's instruction, and some say with Johnson's help) explaining the peculiar psychological circumstances leading up to the hoax.

He was, he said, a man made miserable and ground down by repeated rejections and dismissal from a literary and scholastic establishment which would never give him a fair trial. He had, he lamented, seen no other way to gain the respect he longed for than to massage Milton's texts to his own ends. He hoped, of course, for forgiveness and understanding.

So poor was the quality of the faked material he created, so unlikeable was he and so rude were his suggestions about Milton, that he in fact found very little support at all after the exposure of his hoax. He decided to flee Europe altogether and ended up working as a schoolmaster in Barbados where, his neighbours recorded, he was as illtempered, hot-headed and badly behaved as he ever was at home. When he died in 1771 fewer people will have mourned him even than poor Thomas Chatterton, who had died the year before.

## JAMES MACPHERSON

THERE CAN BE nothing so conducive to planning a grand literary hoax than waking up one morning and realizing you're a supply teacher in rural Scotland instead of the cutting-edge poet your university chums had had you down for. So it is perhaps not surprising that James Macpherson, who had published a few verses when he was at Edinburgh and made no secret of his high literary ambitions, suddenly 'found' some miraculously on-trend manuscripts which he knew would have all the critics in the country jumping up and down with excitement.

This eighteenth-century Scottish ne'er-do-well is one of the most famous of all literary hoaxers. Of course, he did do well in one sense – well enough to fool a continent of burgeoning Romantics and make himself a tidy sum while he was about it. But the famed Highland 'translator' of the Ossianic poems never really succeeded at his game, because even though his work is still studied and even read

for pleasure by some, there is a general agreement that he was never a good enough writer to achieve the immortality he craved. Like William Lauder, he was also said by almost all who knew him to be a thoroughly unpleasant man. But, unlike Lauder, his work has been the subject of a storm of controversy that has only recently died down.

His personal story is the first in the history of hoaxers to be available to us in full detail, thanks to his being taken up by all of Scotland's and much of Europe's intelligentsia which, in the mid-eighteenth century, consisted of such trustworthy and prolific writers as Hume, Carlyle, Johnson and perhaps most famously, Goethe.

Born in 1738 in the Scottish Highlands to an old and influential family, James Macpherson was, from the start, seemed, destined for the priesthood. But this clever little boy, educated first at Inverness and then at Aberdeen and Edinburgh, had a passion for old Gaelic folk tales and a love of language which did not go unobserved by his family, who began to realize that something a little more creative than the priesthood might be his destiny.

At Edinburgh University he wrote and published a few poems which were generally considered to be quite terrible, including one called 'The Highlander', an ambitious and interminable heroic poem which appeared in 1758 and which he later tried to suppress. The pattern of attempting to publish something as fiction which you later bring out as objective fact (or at least a literary *object trouvée*) is typical of the literary hoaxer, and its implication of a last-ditch attempt of a would-be writer to make his name is as pertinent to Macpherson as it is to the twenty-first-century's James Frey.

After graduating, the only gainful employment Macpherson could find was a post as a tutor for the staid and isolated Balgowan family. He hated it. Spending long dark evenings cloistered with the offspring of a family of uninspiring dullards and no prospect of the literary success he still longed for, it is perhaps no wonder that he resolved to make his mark on Scottish letters by any means necessary. So, in 1760, still resident at Balgowan, he produced the first of the manuscripts which would make him famous. These *Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland* were, he said, great Gaelic poems by a bard called Ossian which he had collected and translated on his lonely travels around the Highlands. The hero was Fingal (*Fionnghall* meaning 'white stranger') and they told:

A TALE of the times of old! The deeds of days of other years.

The murmur of thy streams, O Lora! brings back the memory of the past. The sound of thy woods, Garmaller, is lovely in mine ear. Dost thou not behold Malvina, a rock with its head of heath! Three aged pines bend from its face; green is the narrow plain at its feet; there the flower of the mountain grows, and shakes its white head in the breeze. The thistle is there alone, shedding its aged beard. Two stones, half sunk in the ground, show their heads of moss. The deer of the mountain avoids the place, for he beholds a dim ghost standing there. The mighty lie, O Malvina! in the narrow plain of the rock.

A tale of the times of old! The deeds of days of other years!

Who comes from the land of strangers, with his thousands around him? The sunbeam pours its bright stream before him; his hair meets the wind of his hills. His face is settled from war. He is calm as the evening beam that looks from the cloud of the west, on Cona's silent vale. Who is it but Comhal's son, the king of mighty deeds! He beholds the hills with joy, he bids a thousand voices rise. 'Ye have fled over your fields, ye sons of the distant land! The king of the world sits in his hall, and hears of his people's flight. He lifts his red eye of pride; he takes his father's sword. Ye have fled over your fields, sons of the distant land!'

What might seem like a fairly trite piece of pseudomythological arcana to our cynical modern ears appeared just at the right moment to be taken seriously. It was a time when all Europe's young countries were madly trying to clothe their cultural identities with any tattered bits of history they could find, so the idea of an ancient Scottish Homer was too good to be true. This was Rousseau's moment, and alongside his 'noble savage' stood Macpherson's hero of the Highlands, a creature of windswept splendour imbued with an innate sense of chivalry and order. Here was an earthy soldier

schooled by mother nature, who would fight for the reputation of rural Scottish culture and give readers a good many thrills besides.

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And if a side-effect of Macpherson's fortuitous discovery was great riches, glory and, eventually, a seat in the House of Commons, well, those were crosses he was willing to bear.

When *Fragments of Ancient Poetry collected in the Highlands of Scotland* was an instant success for its publisher, earning its 'translator' the ultimate accolade – a letter of recommendation from the philosopher David Hume – Macpherson did what all literary wunderkinds must do: he quit his job and set off to find more inspiration. Luckily for him, it took no more than a few sallies forth into the heathery countryside to miraculously come upon enough material to fill two more books of Erse verse: *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763).

It was around this time, however, that eyebrows began to be raised over the authenticity of Ossianic work. Samuel Johnson, never a man to mince his words, claimed that not only could any man have written this doggerel, but many children could have done so too. Yet the books had been translated into several European languages and, as with so many hoaxers, the juggernaut must have seemed to Macpherson to be impossible to stop now. And anyway, why would he want to? His attitude to his doubters was relaxed, even when all the major names in publishing and criticism were at war over the veracity of his poems. He claimed to have the original manuscripts of much of the work, but declined to share them with his readers. (Years later, one of his supporters did publish the 'originals' but they were Gaelic poems written in Macpherson's hand, and only sparked off a new controversy over whether they hadn't been translated from English to Gaelic in the first place.)

Now hideously pompous and ill-humoured, Macpherson was nobody's favourite. Even Hume, not known for his bitching, said he had 'scarce ever known a man more perverse and unamiable'. Macpherson disingenuously conceded in his preface to the 1765 edition of *The Poems of Ossian*, that his overnight renown 'might flatter the vanity of one fond of fame'. He further wrote that 'The eagerness with which these Poems have been received abroad, is a recompense for the coldness with which a few have affected to treat them at home'. But given that within a few years he would have abandoned poetry for a life in colonial politics, it seems that the plaudits of foreigners were not a recompense enough.

By 1764, he was preparing to leave the British Isles for the colony of Pensacola, now Florida (a suitable retirement place for a wealthy old cross-patch even now) where he had been offered an official post.

For the next part of his relatively short life, he kept out of the literary scene which had built him up and knocked him down, but on returning to London in 1766 he misguidedly decided to take up the pen again, producing his version of the history of Britain. If this got laughed out of the critics' circle (which it did) nothing could compare to the monumental pasting his translation of Homer's *Iliad* received in 1773. It takes an author of supreme confidence to undertake a work of this magnitude especially when one of the greatest versions of all time – Alexander Pope's – had been published a generation before. What bedraggled laurels Macpherson had to rest on as an interpreter of ancient heroic myth were not enough to shield him from the merciless kicking he now received. But perhaps by this time he was genuinely unbothered by the scorn poured on him from all corners. Perhaps he was happy just to be rich, well-travelled and talked about. Considering what we know of his insatiable desire for fame, surely he would have been rather pleased to know that long after his death he would continue to ignite passionate debate about the authorship of his most famous work.

Critics and historians have now proved conclusively that Macpherson did some admirable and interesting things. He did love the poetic folklore of his native lands, and did indeed travel the



extensively, recording songs and poems told to him by locals. He probably even used his not very brilliant knowledge of the Gaelic language to translate snatches of what he heard into English prose. And he inspired such important figures as Sir Walter Scott in their grand literary projects. But he had neither the linguistic skills nor the imaginative ones to do what he claimed to have done: to translate the great lost work of folk literature into the English language. All he wanted was fame enough to have his name echo down the corridors of future libraries. Which it still does, albeit for all the wrong reasons.

## THOMAS CHATTERTON

THE MOST FAMOUS image of England's most romantic hoaxer is of him lying dead in his Holborn garret, flame-haired and pale-faced, surrounded by torn-up pieces of manuscript. Outside the little window London's grey rooftops stretch into the distance. The scene in the bare room is pitiful. But the real locus of the story is in Bristol, in the muniments room of the beautiful parish church at St Mark Redcliffe.

Sextons of this church had been members of the Chatterton family for generations, and at the time of Thomas's birth in 1752 it was in the hands of the poet's uncle. Thomas was born after his father had died, and his impecunious mother, with a daughter to raise as well as her son, had to take in sewing to make ends meet. Finding a way to put food on the table was therefore of greater concern than giving her son a literary education, but Thomas, the quality of whose literary output would lead many to call him a genius, was drawn to letters as if by fate. Specifically, he was drawn to some fragments of an illuminated manuscript which fell into his hands one day as he played in the vicarage. His mother had been tearing the pages up for scraps, but when she saw the child's wonder at their content she started about teaching him to read.

Before long, despite being constantly undermined and teased at his tough school for the poor boys of Bristol, Chatterton was composing verses of his own and borrowing from the library book after book of medieval poetry and history. His school, Colston's Charity, was a brutish place, and although many considered the quiet and melancholy Chatterton to be soft in the head, one master, Mr Philip Philips was a writer of poems himself and so encouraged his boys to experiment with writing. At twelve Chatterton showed him 'Elinoure and Juga', a poem he claimed to be by a little-known fifteenth-century author. Philips was impressed. Chatterton began to work on more such compositions, forming in his mind the apocryphal story of how he had found the manuscripts in an old stone chest in the church's store room. In fact he probably did take the bare materials for his forgeries from there, just as he took the imaginative ones from his excursions into the works of Spenser, Chaucer and John Kersey's *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum*.

The story he would tell was that the poems he found were by a young man called Rowley, also of Bristol, who several hundred years before had written under the patronage of real-life local burgher Master William Canynge. Chatterton inhabited this fantasy quite fully, even imagining a vision of the young Canynge as a boy genius like himself, as these lines from 'The Storie of William Canynge' illustrate:

When the fate-marked babe acome to sight, I saw him eager gasping after light. In all his sheepen gambols and child's play, In every merrymaking, fair, or wake, I kenn'd a perpled light of wisdom's ray; He ate down learning with the wastel-cake; As wise as any of the aldermen, He'd wit enow to make a mayor at ten.

But even before he started composing the poems in earnest, he submitted another *object trouvée* to

local newspaper, and had it not only accepted but roundly praised by all who saw it. This was the supposed account of a twelfth-century mayor crossing a new bridge over the Avon in Bristol, which would have been of interest to local historians because the new bridge which had just been built in the one's place was currently the talk of the town.

He also tried his hand at creating a pedigree for a local pewter-maker who had high hopes for his genealogy, taking payment for 'discovering' a document which said that the man, Henry Burgum, was descended from one Syrr Johan de Berghamme.

Now aged fifteen and apprenticed to a lawyer, a job he hated but had little choice in taking, Chatterton began devoting all his spare time to the Rowley hoax. All his life he had mooned around the church and its environs, its effigies and manuscripts his only friends, but now there was a purpose to his being 'alone and palely loitering' as Keats, who would dedicate his 'Endymion' to him, might have seen it.

Chatterton was by now a poet of considerable powers and it is hard to believe he was only a teenager when he wrote works such as the great dramatic poem 'Aella'. He showed the Rowley poems not only to his former teacher but to a local historian, Mr Barrett, his supporter and patron, Henry Burgum, and the collector, George Catcott. Then he decided to move things up a level, approaching the London publisher Robert Dodsley and asking him whether he might submit to him some 'ancient poems, and an interlude, perhaps the oldest dramatic piece extant, wrote by one Rowley, a priest of Bristol, who lived in the reigns of Henry VI and Edward IV'.

Dodsley was a key figure in eighteenth-century letters and a man whose rags to riches story was well known. He was the publisher of almost every famous writer of the late 1700s, from Defoe and Richardson to David Garrick and Edmund Burke. He himself had started life as a weaver and then a footman but, having been discovered by the great poet Alexander Pope and set up as a publisher, playwright and poet, he went on to define the literary canon of his generation with his famous anthology, *A Collection of Poems By Several Hands*. It must have seemed to an ambitious young Chatterton that he might look kindly on a boy from a similarly lowly background with equally grand literary aspirations.

When his submissions received no reply, he felt the bite of the first of many professional disappointments, but resolved to try someone else. Horace Walpole looked like the right candidate and this time he appeared to have some success: Walpole, of course, had perpetrated his own literary hoax in the shape of *The Castle of Otranto* (which he confessed to having written quite soon after its first publication) but this did not at first seem to lend him any special powers of detection, for he replied that he should like to see more of Rowley's 'wonderful' work and quite possibly publish it. But in the time it took for Chatterton to write back detailing his tall tale of the discovery of the papers in a church chest and outlining his life story as one who is poor but who wishes to better himself, Walpole had shown the manuscripts to his friend, the poet Thomas Gray, who had pronounced it a fake. So poor Chatterton received a brusque brush-off and was advised to seek his fortune elsewhere. Years later, and too late for it to do any good, Walpole would admit he thought there never 'existed so masterly a genius'.

At this stage Chatterton was still optimistic and believed that he would soon be able to make a living from writing rather than clerking in a dreary law firm. He also dearly wished to help and reward his mother who was now hard at work teaching as well as sewing and carrying on the business of keeping an impecunious young family together. He decided to try his hand at writing satire for some of the many political magazines that were in vogue at the time, and it is to his credit that his abilities were elastic enough to earn him professional work in the *Middlesex Journal, Town and Country*

*Magazine* and the *Freeholder's Magazine*. He lampooned the leading figures of the day and just before Easter 1770 pulled off his journalistic *coup de grâce*: the bold, semi-satirical 'Last Will and Testament' in which he expressed his intention to take his life the following day due to his dissatisfaction with the modern world and his hopeless place in it. Reading this impassioned piece, his formerly hard-nosed master, Mr Lambert, released him from his employ on the spot and sent him on to London to seek his literary fortune.

By the end of April that year he was in the capital, living in Shoreditch and determined to earn money from his writing. He did manage to get work for various periodicals, and sat up all night writing endlessly in poetry and prose, satirical and straight, even parodying Macpherson's Ossianic poems in one piece. But although he had the flattery of editors he was hardly being paid enough to eat. Despite having spent his first wages on presents for his mother and sister back home in Bristol, he somehow found the money to move into a room in Brooke Street, just off Chancery Lane. It was here, a little more than a couple of months after arriving in London, that he must have realized what little luck he had was running out. Neighbours reported that he wandered around looking half-starved, but always too proud to take the meals and charity they offered. Determined to make his own way but disillusioned by the difficulty of earning money in London's overcrowded literary world, he reverted to the comfort of the Rowley poems, producing a new work, the 'Excelente Balade of Charitie'.

No longer having access to the piles of forgotten old books and papers of St Mary Redcliffe, he could come by no parchment to write on so made what he said was a transcription from a medieval manuscript found in Bristol. He sent it off to the *Town and Country Magazine* in high hopes but it was rejected. Chatterton, still less than twenty years old, would not live to see another summer. When his body was found in the little room in Brooke Street, dead from self-administered arsenic, it was thought he hadn't eaten for several days. The room was strewn with scraps of hand-written manuscripts which he had torn into tiny bits in the hours before his death. It is hard to imagine a more pathetic scene, except perhaps for the pauper's burial he had the next day in a municipal ground round the corner.

Hoaxing, for Thomas Chatterton, was more an outlet for his immense creative powers than a ruse to gain fame. Although he needed money, and desperately, and no doubt realized he was owed not only payment but respect for the work he was creating, the circumstances of his dishonest project were so urgent, passionate and – crucially – tinged with the satirical humour of one who liked, despite all his life's hardships, to laugh, that he must surely be considered the noblest of the English hoaxers. His legacy reflects this: not only was he posthumously taken up by the Romantic poets – Keats and Wordsworth both lauding him in verse and holding him up as an inspirational figure and even a martyr to the cause of poesy – but even in the twentieth century his story is still being retold and plumbed for new meaning. Recent examples of his afterlife can be found in the work of the novelist Peter Ackroyd, the opera composer Ruggiero Leoncavallo and the Australian vocal artist Matthew Dewey.

However for one young man – also a melancholy lawyer's apprentice with a troubled home life – the story of Chatterton would become an obsession, and one which, less than two decades after the Bristol poet's demise and about half a mile down the road from where he died, would replay itself in much more daring, if less glorious, terms. That young man was William Henry Ireland.

WILLIAM HENRY IRELAND

WILLIAM HENRY IRELAND was only a teenager when he pulled off one of the most daring hoaxes ever to dupe literary London. In 1775 he was born into a world and a family in thrall to the notion of literary and historical relics, which would pay a high price to own an object or book touched by the hand of one of Europe's great minds. Before the century was out, William and his father Samuel would pay a far higher price than either could have imagined when the plan first took hold in the younger man's mind. The gusto with which William produced the faked Shakespeare documents that made him famous before he had reached adulthood was incredible: he executed all the documents in his bulging dossier in little under two months in 1795. And the spur which endowed him with this extraordinary energy for composition was neither money nor fame but the peculiar circumstances of his unfortunate upbringing.

William Henry was brought up by Samuel Ireland, a socially and intellectually ambitious man from East London who may or may not have been his real father, and Samuel's 'housekeeper' Mrs Freeman, who may well have been his mother. Raised to believe his birth mother had died, the naturally weedy and shy William fought a constant battle for attention at home. At school, his main aim was to avoid the attentions of his masters, so impossible did he find it to excel or even keep up in any of his classes. Also sharing the family house at Norfolk Street, just off the Strand, were Mrs Freeman's two delightful and intelligent daughters; and if they weren't enough to take attention away from poor William, at the centre of it all was Samuel's beloved collection of books and antiquities which he protected and nurtured with the single-minded obsession of a new mother. He made a living by selling books of engravings and historical relics to the aristocrats and intellectuals whose company he craved, and the house had become something of a museum by the time the likes of Boswell came to view the priceless Shakespeare papers he claimed to own. Mrs Freeman herself was an occasional writer of satire, the girls were keen artists, and most evenings the family would sit amongst Samuel's treasures disporting and bettering themselves by reading aloud from Shakespeare.

William himself did not seem to have inherited any of the talents of his family, his only passion being to sit in his bedroom making pretend suits of armour. However, the family had connections with the Drury Lane Theatre and it was here that William seemed most at home, revelling in the make-believe world of the back-stage scene-builders and costume designers, and even getting the odd walk-on part in a play. But most of the time he found himself centre of attention for all the wrong reasons: rarely able to get his family's attention, never the recipient of anyone's praise and always wondering about the true nature of his parentage, he must have cut a forlorn figure as he sloped around the city on errands for his father. When he was eventually allowed to leave school he was apprenticed to a law firm in one of the nearby Inns of Court, a job he hated. He had already read about Chatterton (who had the same job and also lacked paternal love) and, he wrote in his confession years later, was already wondering what other similarities there might be between them.

At nineteen years old, William was plugging away at his dreary job and coming home to a family who had little time for him. Yet outside this little world, as he must have known from his father's doings, England and Europe were in the grip of an obsession with literary and historical relics which would ultimately enable him to make his mark. The fall of the great French families in the Revolution meant the international market in *objets d'art* was suddenly flooded with the flotsam of their grand existences. Collectors were going wild for paintings, furniture and books with impressive pedigree and grand connections. At the same time, as a reaction to this, some ingenious Englishmen were trying to create a market in home-grown arts and artefacts which celebrated the landscape, history and culture of their own land. Samuel Ireland, engraver, artist and inveterate collector was one such man, and the success of his collections of sketches of places such as the Avon valley were what enabled him

to buy the house in Norfolk Street.

The chief obsession of the day, however, was Shakespeare. The emerging cult of bardolatry was sweeping the land, thanks largely to the irrepressible actor-manager David Garrick. In 1769 the famous Shakespeare-lover had staged an exuberant jubilee celebration at his hero's birthplace in the Midlands. Statues were erected, encomia were written, celebrities were invited to attend balls in remembrance of the playwright and, as an offshoot of this grand affair, a crooked industry sprang up selling spurious bits of tat to tourists. The Irelands themselves were duped by one such tradesman when they made a trip to Stratford and came away with a chair said to have been sat in by Shakespeare as he wooed his wife.

Unsurprisingly, then, the one thing that William's father lusted after but could never get his hands on was something written in Shakespeare's hand. A whole play would be too much to hope for, of course, but even a single signature or scribbled note, he was fond of saying, would be worth exchanging his whole library for. His son was listening. And some time between the family holiday in Stratford in 1793 and the autumn of 1794, he came up with a perfect way to win the respect of the bardolatrous Samuel.

William had sense enough to begin with a dry run. From one of the many local booksellers near his house he bought an old book of prayers, written by a member of Lincoln's Inn, which bore the stamp of Queen Elizabeth. By faking a note from the author to the queen, he would be able to say it was a rare presentation copy rather than merely one which had been bought for the royal library. He did so, trying his best to imitate the spidery handwriting of the sixteenth century, and took the results to the bookbinder in New Inn Passage for approval. To this man, a Mr Laurie, he quipped that he was planning to play a trick on his father and wanted to know if his creation looked authentic enough to pass muster. Laurie and his assistant agreed that it did, but recommended he rewrite it using a special ink preparation, well known to scribes of the day, which would make it look more genuinely aged. The solution was sold to him in a vial and he was instructed to hold the written sheet up to the fire to make the antique-looking writing come up a satisfyingly dark mottled brown. He did as he was told, and his father was fooled and delighted.

William swiftly followed this with another mini-hoax, a forged letter pertaining to a bust of Cromwell. Typically of his lack of thoroughness, he had not bothered to find out that the correspondent claiming to be giving this fine portrait-sculpture to Cromwell was in fact one of the man's arch rivals and so very unlikely to be wishing him anything but ill luck. Fortunately, Ireland Senior was also oblivious to the fact and accepted the new addition to his collection with glee.

Now the stage was set for William's hoaxing operation to launch in earnest. He stocked up on old paper by buying the unused end-pages of folios from a bookseller in St Martin's Lane. He bought a collection of antique seals and doctored them according to his limited knowledge of Elizabethan heraldry. He even tore a piece of cloth from a wall-hanging in the House of Lords, when he visited to hear the king speak, and pulled it apart to make the string with which he had heard old documents were customarily tied together. Finally, he laid in a good supply of the magic ink from the man in New Inn Passage and set about practising the signature he had seen in facsimile in his father's copy of Dr Johnson's *Shakespeare*. Then he went back to Norfolk Street and told an astonished Samuel that he had found the bard's signature on a mortgage deed.

At that moment, after nearly twenty years of effective parental abandonment, William had the full and rapt attention of his father. Overjoyed with his son's discovery, Samuel immediately wanted more. He begged to know where the boy had found this incredible relic and William, thinking on his feet, began to spin the unlikely tale of Mr H.

Mr H, who wished to remain anonymous, had, he said, encountered William by chance one day when he was on an errand and discovered that the boy had an interest in antiquities. He happened to mention that he had a chest full of old papers at his grand house across town and, having little interest in such things, invited William to come and rifle through it and take away anything that caught his eye.

Blinded by ambition to the absurdity of this story, Samuel implored his son to return to Mr H's house and bring him back more treasures, even hinting at the specific sort of things it would be most pleasing to have him unearth. Fuelled by his father's enthusiasm, William threw himself into a frenzy of activity which must have been something of a shock to the system for such an idle youth. Happily, his employer was rarely in his chambers, so he kept his forging materials in a locked cabinet there and continued his work undisturbed.

The next Shakespeare document he produced was a receipt pertaining to the business of the Globe Theatre. Claiming to be a rare promissory note from the bard to his colleague John Hemynge, it contained both a mistake in the year the theatre was built and a misspelling of Stratford. This was passed off as a mere sign that, in Shakespeare's time, orthography was less standard, and scribes were more careless. William appeared to be on a roll. Another note regarding a play performed before the Earl of Leicester was dated after Leicester's death and also misspelled his name, but, astonishingly, none seemed to mind. William even created a letter claiming to be from Shakespeare to an ancestor of the Irelands (also called, coincidentally, William) thanking him for saving him from drowning.

Of course Samuel, not wishing to compromise his carefully built reputation as a serious book collector, sought to have all these papers authenticated. Poor William had to sit by half-terrified and half-amused as the city's foremost handwriting, bookselling and heraldry experts scrutinized everything from seal to letter-formation. The fact that these great men would sit in what William now realized was a bogus Shakespeare courting chair only served to increase the sense of superiority the young hoaxer felt when they all deemed the documents bona fide.

Before long, William was using his phoney papers to paint the great man in colours which he thought would especially please his father. Unbelievably boldly, these included a lengthy profession of Shakespeare's Protestant faith, written in his own hand, which was designed to put paid once and for all to rumours of his Catholicism. Then came a love-letter to Anne Hathaway, complete with locks of hair and romantic verses. In his later *Confession*, William would admit he composed these things 'just as the thoughts arose in [his] head' and, as for the actual writing, a spidery scrawl with weird orthography and nothing recognizably Shakespearean, he merely used as many 'double-yous and esss' as possible'.

How could so many people have been fooled? How could even Boswell be blind to the truth? To a large extent the lack of special forensic techniques must be to blame, and also the paucity of examples of Shakespeare's real writing. But in the main, as with all successful literary hoaxes, it was simply because people wanted it so much to be true. Like the perpetrators of the Sophocles hoax and the Hitler Diaries, William Henry had tapped into a vein of cultural enthusiasm so rich that it obscured the rational minds of any number of intelligent men.

If the imaginations of the victims were willing, so was that of William himself, albeit to a different, more private end. He was never so unhinged as to trick himself into believing his output was real, but as he began to see that his actions might actually be discrediting his father rather than helping him, he began to enter into a most bizarre correspondence with him – writing as Mr H.

Samuel had wanted to apply in writing to Mr H to ask him about the provenance of the papers, and William encouraged him to do so. In his replies he used his imagined relationship with the son to tell

the father how much he liked and admired the boy, and how clever and soulful he thought he was. ~~In one letter, which reads very much like a schoolboy's made-up games note, he even opined that he~~ thought Samuel ought to stop making William powder his wig, because it was unnecessary and expensive. In this imagined voice, over a series of increasingly emotional letters, he says to his father all the things he could not say in real life. This is about as far from hoaxing for financial gain as you can get.

Still using the story of Mr H, still responding to the excitable desires of Samuel who was now becoming quite famous in London for his burgeoning collection of Shakespeare papers, William thought about the *coup de grâce* that would ultimately bring the whole edifice of his deception crashing down around him: the creation of an entire new Shakespeare play.

The story of Vortigern and Rowena is one Shakespeare might well have told. It can be found in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, one of his favourite sources, and tells a *Lear*-ish, *Macbeth*-ish tale of an ancient British king who would give away half his crown. But in Ireland's clumsy hands it is about as un-Shakespearean as it is possible to imagine. At the very worst, it reads like a silly pastiche, or so thought the various dissenters, growing in number and led by the renowned Shakespeare critic Malone, who were beginning to question the papers' authenticity. And so thought the cast and audience at Drury Lane when, amazingly, in April 1796, Samuel persuaded his contacts in the theatre to put on a performance of it.

By this time, even before the night of the ill-fated play (which surely rates as one of the most disastrous events in English theatre), William knew he was in too deep. Journalists were writing unforgiving editorials about the Shakespeare papers, cruel satires on William's crazy spelling abounded in magazines and more and more experts were joining Malone in opposing the Ireland version of events. Despite the initial support of the Prince of Wales, Pitt the Younger, Edmund Burke and Boswell, William was making too many mistakes for his hoax to last for long. He had just produced an 'original' text of *King Lear*. Its spelling was a sight to behold ('Unfriended, new adopte becoming 'Unnefreynnededde newee adoppetedde') but even if that did nothing to alert any remaining doubters, the fact that he prefaced the text with an address to 'mye gentle Readerres' ought to have rung alarm bells with anyone conversant enough with Shakespeare to know that he had viewers, not readers.

Malone, referring to the mythical chest in which William claimed Mr H kept the papers, said that after the imaginary chest in which Chatterton had 'found' his poems, he 'did not expect to have heard again, for some time at least, of such a repository for ancient manuscripts'. A satirical poem was written about Ireland, positioning him alongside Macpherson, Chatterton and Lauder as one of the famous 'four forgers' of the day. And when the cartoonist James Gillray illustrated the verse with an unkind caricature, the Ireland's fate never to be taken seriously was surely sealed.

Finally, William decided to confess his crime to his family. First he told Mrs Freeman and his sisters, then his father. All of them flatly refused to believe him. It was beyond their comprehension that the intellectually puny black sheep of their family could pull off such a stunt, and it would take months of persuasion for them even to start to believe that maybe this Mr H was the hoaxer. As long as he lived, which was not to be very long, Samuel never accepted his son had perpetrated the scam.

William would go on to marry, travel, set up a private lending library in Kensington and write many books and poems, not all bad, of his own. But his most fascinating work is his *Confession* published some time after the event, in which he describes his duplicitous acts as those of a foolish boy who only wanted to please his father. And in 1832 he would publish *Vortigern* as his own work of fiction – a final publicity-hungry move which prefigures the twentieth-century literary hoaxer's vogue.

for selling as fiction what he was once vilified for trying to ply as fact.

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