

# Mists and mystery on the moors: fellow friends in a famously faked fiction

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Theodore Upton Ivory

»FELLOW FRIENDS«

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VOX POP EDITION

21 St Thomas Street

Bristol BS99 7DX

United Kingdom

St Thomas' University Publishers

Bristol 2008

270pp.

What is an original? The word comes from the Latin “origo”, or origin. An original is an encounter between the urgrund and reality. It occupies the fundamental level on a scale of creation and genesis – the level of uniqueness itself. In this sense, an original also represents the authentic mythological extreme, the yearning for the origin of being, paradise, the original act of creation essentially reserved for the gods. And yet by the (post-) modern age at the latest, we have been driven out of paradise. The act of creation lies behind us and the craft itself lies ahead. If this craft is guided by inspiration, we call it art. If it has no soul, it is given the name of industry. Such progress is apparently only an illusion. The yearning for creation persists in the age of industrialization.

The cleverly crafted counterfeit wields the same, if not greater, power of reality – even culminating in forgery, creating an exaggerated form of reality superior to the original in the sophistication of its construction. An original does not have to be sophisticated in every sense of the word. It is what it is. A good forgery must always be sophisticated – in all respects. That is why a forgery represents the epitome of reason. Its genius is the intellect.

Forgery is not an act, it is not about a specific work, a particular picture or suchlike. True masters of this art of deception also forge the context and the surroundings. Between 1985 and 1995, the Briton John Myatt not only forged works of art in the style of Chagall, Giacometti and Matisse, but also arranged for an accomplice in possession of faked documents purporting to confirm his claim to the title of an academic doctorate to penetrate the archives of famous British museums. Once inside those hallowed halls, the accomplice “planted” documents indicating that Myatt’s paintings had already been loaned to the

Tate Gallery, the Victoria & Albert Museum or the Institute of Contemporary Art – in the guise of genuine works by Chagall, Giacometti and Matisse. Once these documents were in place, Myatt offered the paintings to London auction houses and galleries, which asked the museums to confirm the works were genuine – a matter that posed no problems. After all, there was documentary evidence that the works had been exhibited, so they must therefore be genuine.

Daniel Defoe was also a master of deception. He posed as the publisher of the ostensibly authentic adventures of seaman Robinson Crusoe. However, not the shipwrecked Crusoe, but Defoe himself had written what the journalist in person described in the preface as the “true account”. Defoe availed himself of what may be considered as the modern-day style of reporting and generated maximum credibility by couching a fashionable theme in fashionable language. The literary and journalistic craft lent a ring of truth to the forgery by creating an aura of credibility and thus establishing an immediacy between the reader and the authentic unwilling adventurer. Even today, Robinson Crusoe is seen as the prototype of the realistic adventure novel, although this was in fact a philosophical work on the self-constitution of bourgeois man through labour. So much for the reliability of reality and journalistic craft.

The Scot James Macpherson achieved even greater fame among his contemporaries and far beyond the British Isles. In 1760, a successful author named Hugh Blair published “Fragments of Ancient Poetry”. This was a collection of fragments of ancient poems from the Scottish highlands translated from the Gaelic. Blair had entrusted this task to his private tutor James Macpherson. He saved himself the trouble of researching into the “old Gaelic chants of the Highlands” and wrote them himself. Two of the 16 texts were in fact actually based on writings passed down through the ages, the rest were – quite simply – invented.

Blair was unable to see through his creative ghost writer, but smelt a sensation. At this time, the Scottish soul was already suffering from its ostensibly ahistorical roots. The longed-for Scottish national culture, a fiction in itself, reverberated in the souls of lowlanders and highlanders craving for recognition. Blair took the forgeries by the 20-year old private tutor to be fragments of a long-lost Scottish national epic poem and even found an author to fit his theory. Blair came up with Ossian, a figure from Scottish-Gaelic mythology, also determining the hero of these poems written by the blind bard as none other than King Fingal. Macpherson thus delivered proof of the longed-for tradition in the shape of “Fingal” and subsequently also “Termora” – again ostensibly a translation from the Gaelic. The songs of epic battles and heroes’ fates in the fights for kingdoms were published in 1762 and 1763. Scotland’s pride against the hated English was once again confirmed.

Samuel Johnson immediately condemned the poems as “not authentic and of no poetic value.” Johnson was the most important personality in 18<sup>th</sup> century English literature. An important voice, but an ineffectual one. Johnson talked of “an unadulterated

swindle” and demanded to see the original texts. His response to Blair’s enquiry as to whether a contemporary author would be in a position to produce such poetry was: “Yes, Sir; many men, many women, and many children.” But he was powerless to prevent the triumphant progress of the “Works of Ossian”.

The public in Pre-Romantic Europe wanted a national epic poem from the mythical past – and got one. Ossian delivered the melancholy, the nostalgia and the *weltschmerz* that suited the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The poems by the Celtic bard who had been “proved” to live 1,500 years ago touched the chord of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century zeitgeist and consciousness, not only throughout the British Isles.

“Ossian” inspired a whole generation making its way towards *Sturm und Drang*. Herder brought the “Homer of the North” (Madame de Staël) to Goethe and from there straight on to Werther. Goethe borrowed whole passages. Klopstock, Lenz, Gerstenberg, Schiller, Hölderlin, Novalis, Tieck and Jean Paul joined the ranks of Ossian’s elegiac admirers, as did the much more down-to-earth Napoleon. The Ossian forgery was tenacious. Even in 1906, Meyers *Konversations-Lexikon* still clung to the fable of the ancient Celtic origins. Macpherson, who could never confirm the authenticity of his ostensibly Gaelic sources – purported originals were soon exposed as translations of the Macpherson texts back into Gaelic – accused his critics of “prejudice” and “ignorance” and called them “the most naïve and ignorant of people.”

It was the ostensible authenticity that played the crucial role in the enthusiastic reception given to the “Fragments”. This was underscored by a preface written by Blair assuring readers that the translations were very literal.

Herder asked to be read extracts from Ossian on his deathbed. And unlike poor Herder, James Macpherson was given a state funeral. The most successful forger in literary history, who gave his contemporaries so much, was buried in Westminster Abbey not far from Poets’ Corner.

He died a rich and much respected man with a seat in the House of Lords until his death. Friedrich Schlegel, who translated Ossian into German, wrote: “His characters are shadows from the past and that is how it should be.”

These mysterious Scottish figures have returned to England at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A manuscript was found in the white mists on Exmoor. A familiar location. Richard Doddridge Blackmore’s Lorna Doone lived here. His work, published in 1869, appeared anonymously to begin with, then became one of the most successful books to have been passed on to us from the age of Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy. The lost author of the manuscript now discovered on Exmoor is Theodore Upton Ivory, his legacy is “fellow friends”, an encyclopaedic work on friendship across the centuries. The “rediscovered work of unknown origin” was discovered by Klaus Kocks, professor at St. Thomas’ in Bristol, during a walk on Exmoor, the moorland between the English counties of Devon and Somerset, in the late summer of 2008. A heavy thunderstorm forced Kocks, on his way from Porlock to Exbridge, to take shelter in a derelict hut. There, he found a lead vessel containing rolls of paper. A blacksmith in Exbridge opened the vessel and Kocks leafed through its contents at the legendary “Fox ’n Goose”.

All attempts to find the author failed. His tracks disappeared in the mists on the moors. Kocks decided to publish “fellow friends”. “fellow friends” is a book about friends, about great intellect and about the ghosts of friendship. It traces the theme of friendship at many levels through the ages, through philosophy, poetry and politics, and reflects on the important role of friendship in discovering the secret of life, creating a dense mosaic of theories, literature, history and tales. Famous friends are brought to life, many of them hailing from the Continent and particularly Germany, such as Lessing and Mendelssohn, Goethe and Schiller. Most of the tales are bizarre. After

Schiller’s reburial, for example, Goethe ordered his friend’s skull to be brought to his library and honoured him with a poem, one hand placed on the bleached skull while writing. So much for the often surprising book written by Theodore Upton Ivory.

The history of the discovery and the fact that the rolled-up pages of manuscript have already been printed in English and German so soon after their discovery is no less surprising. It is evident to the observer that this cannot be. There are solid grounds for doubt here. Blair’s preface gave the Ossian the seal of authenticity and thus laid the foundation for the import of this poetry, it was Defoe’s literary journalism that breathed life into Robinson Crusoe. Kocks’ preface shapes the identity of Theodore Upton Ivory. The author and his work are torn from the mists of fantasy and anchored in the real world. Here, too, the essence is a myth – that of friendship. The reality of “fellow friends” remains to be seen.

It may be that, one day, Ivory, Kocks, Crusoe, Defoe, Ossian and Macpherson meet in the “Fox ’n Goose”. That would come as no surprise to the pub’s locals and regulars. On some evenings, after a few beers, it is easy to imagine one or the other of these personalities disappearing into one of the pub’s nookeries. They would certainly have much to talk about, these dab hands of what the Yiddish language describes as *chutzpah*, these *hommes de lettre* who open up the moors every now and then. Unlike those Transylvanian legends, they are not afraid of light. Rather than robbing their contemporaries of their lifeblood, they pump new *élan* and inspiration into their veins.

I read “fellow friends” at one fell swoop in “Bettsy Crampbell’s Winebar” in Tavistock, and am undecided as to whether I should recommend it or not. If I were to expose “fellow friends,” the book would acquire the fame and reputation of its Scottish predecessor. That would be pathetic. Ivory’s fellow friends are masters of a famously faked fiction – that is for sure.