

Arts and Culture

Scotland's most infamous hoax and the blind Highland warrior bard brought to life

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James Macpherson's controversial Ossian poems caused a huge stir after they were published in the late 18th century.



Martin O'Connor is the writer and performer of *Through the Shortbread Tin*, which the National Theatre of Scotland will take on tour in 2025. Picture: Eoin Carey | Eoin Carey/National Theatre of Scotland

He was the writer behind one of the most elaborate and notorious hoaxes ever carried out in Scotland.

James Macpherson's infamous "discovery" of epic poems of ancient Scottish heroes, heroines and wild landscapes caused a literary sensation when he published them in the late 18th century.

Now a new Scottish stage show is to recall the controversy over the authenticity of the poems said to have been originally written by a blind "warrior bard" in the third century.



Poet and performer Martin O'Connor is creating the new National Theatre of Scotland show Through the Shortbread Tin. | Supplied

“Through the Shortbread Tin,” which the National Theatre of Scotland will tour around the country next year, will examine how the tales of “Ossian” helped shape images of Highland culture and Scottish identity across Europe after they were published.

It will raise questions about the motivations of Macpherson, who was widely accused by historians and academics of fabricating the poems, which he claimed to have translated from Gaelic manuscripts.



Poet and performer Martin O'Connor is creating the new National Theatre of Scotland show Through the Shortbread Tin. | Eoin Carey/National Theatre of Scotland

The show, which is being created by Glasgow-based poet, performer and theatre maker Martin O'Connor, will deploy the Scots language and Gaelic song as it explores how Scottish culture, myths, history and identity have influenced modern-day Scots.

An official announcement from NTS about the show, which will be directed by Lu Kemp, states: “This tartan-trimmed tale of Highland history spread far and wide, capturing the imagination of thousands – but was it built on a deception?”

“Audiences are invited to join Martin O'Connor and James Macpherson on an oral odyssey spanning centuries of Scottish history, exploring the myths we tell each other and the stories we tell ourselves.”

Through the Shortbread Tin will premiere in Melrose in April before heading to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Ullapool, Stornoway, Skye, Dornie, Cumbernauld, Oban, Helensburgh, Shetland and Inverness.

The show has emerged from a year-long research project, backed with £20,000 from Creative Scotland's annual Dr Gavin Wallace Fellowship, after an open call for writers to respond to a theme of "epic."

Mr O'Connor told The Scotsman he had become intrigued by what inspired Macpherson, who was brought up in the Highlands in the aftermath of the 1745 Jacobite Rising and the Battle of Culloden the following year.

He said: "I didn't really know the story of James Macpherson and Ossian at all when I started doing the research.

"I had only really come across it as I had started to learn Gaelic and was incorporating it in my work.

"I was able to really get into the whole story with that funding opportunity that I was really lucky to get.

"I was really glad I had a year to do the research, which this show has very much come out of.

"Not only are the stories massive and all the collected Ossian works are really big, but everything else around them are huge. There are so many complexities.

"The thing that I was really drawn to was the whole idea of the hoax, which is really the greatest literary hoax of all-time. It is a really fun and complicated story, which still has more questions than answers.

"I became more and more interested in why he did it in the first place, where he was coming from, what he saw, what he felt he needed to address at that time by creating this Scottish myth and whether he felt that Scottish culture was being oppressed.

"My interpretation is that he wanted to write some sort of wrong by creating a Scottish story that he was in charge of and that people in Scotland could be proud of. The more I read the more I sympathised with him.

"I will be presenting a version of this story which will play around with ideas of truth and reality. There is a good amount of scope to creatively ask questions, but also have a lot of fun as well."

