

CARANTES NEWSLETTER

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Dear Friends,

Welcome to the sixth Carantes newsletter, and we hope you are all having a good November. As (for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere) the shadows grow longer and the days shorten, it can be easy to become overwhelmed by the events going on across the globe, or increased pressure brought on by the end of the year and an academic semester. Please, take care of yourselves and do what you can to support those around you as we all deal with issues both minor and major.

Continuing our statement from last month's newsletter in relation to the continuing escalation of imperialist violence in Palestine, we would encourage those of you who are able to donate to an organization providing relief for the victims of this violence. If you want to donate but do not know how, or to which organization your money might be best directed, you are welcome to look at our explanation in last month's newsletter for choosing Anera for our own donations and consider if that works for you.

<https://support.anera.org/a/donate> Donate to Anera

<https://www.anera.org/faq/> Anera's FAQ

LOGISTICS & NEWS

We are very happy to say that the Samain public meeting went wonderfully, with a significant increase in the number of attendees from our first meeting, which in no doubt was due to the wonderful lecture provided by Dr **Vanessa Iacocca**. The notes from this meeting, and a brief overview of the paper, will form the bulk of this newsletter's contents.

For those of you who are interested in an online space to discuss material from Carantes, we can also remind you that we have a **Discord server**, which is in the process of being constructed and organized to best facilitate discussion and dialogue.

If any of you are interested, the following link to join the server will be active until the **17th** of November. If you are reading this email at a later point and would like to join, please feel free to email us and we will send you a new link.

<https://discord.gg/ta283F9J>

In terms of upcoming events, some of the Carantes organizing committee will be at **The Tionól**, a yearly conference held by the **Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies**, on the 17th and 18th of November. Last year, this is where some of us first met Dr Iacocca, and where we had the opportunity to meet several people who have since joined the organization. If you see us there and you are comfortable doing so, please feel welcome to come up and chat.

LECTURE NOTES

Dr Iacocca's lecture, titled '**Medievalism and Myths of Essentialism: Deconstructing a Legacy from Romanticism to White Nationalism**', explored the legacy of James Macpherson's construction of a radicalized Scottish Highlander identity in his collection of forged medieval poems centered around Ossian (Oisín, son of Finn, for those of you more familiar with medieval Irish literature). She discussed how later authors drew on this tradition of '**Ossianic Medievalism**' to engage with a running argument regarding the 'barbarity' and 'civility' of different Celtic peoples in the long 19th century.

For those of you unfamiliar with **James Macpherson's** work, a very short summary may be helpful. He wrote *Fingal* (and later, several other poems) which he insisted were drawn from a previously lost medieval manuscript which contained the work of a 3rd century bard named Ossian. While some of the material in Macpherson's work may have been based on elements of stories preserved in the oral tradition in Highlands, his works are ultimately forgeries.

As discussed by Dr Iacocca, Macpherson's poems were written to create a 'civilizing' past for the Scottish Highlands, drawing on heroic sentimentalism to project specific existentialist and politicized visions of race, culture, and nationhood.



Portrait of James Macpherson
by George Romney (1779-1780)

Macpherson's *Fingal* describes a Danish invasion of Ireland which was repelled by Irish warriors and reinforcements from North-West Scotland, engaging with a general motif of overseas invaders seen in medieval Irish and Scottish heroic literature which rose to a height in the 15th century. Macpherson's poems, as drawn from a supposedly-historic text, is used to establish several historical claims. For instance, *Fingal* proposes that the original inhabitants of Britain were 'Celtic derived', while *Ossian* validates Scotland's integration into the British state, by fabricating an identity for the Highlands focused on chivalry martial valor, honor, sensibility, and other values considered 'civilized' and 'British'.

Macpherson's work attacked Anglo-centric views of British identity by claiming that several values important to British identity originated in the Highlands of Scotland. His work suggests that the concept of chivalry originated in the Highlands with the concept of martial valor and honor stressed in his forgeries, that the concept of British liberty originated in an ancient Caledonian political system, and that the concept of legislative power in Britain originated with the druids (and thus, not with the early English). He re-imagines British 'racial identity', putting the ancient Caledonians as the supreme ancestral people which places Scottish Highlanders, the direct descendants of these ancient peoples, as equal (or superior) partners with the English in British identity.

Importantly, Macpherson also focused on attacking Irish tradition. He claims that Ireland was first settled by Britons, but demeans and lessens the Irish bardic tradition, pushing the identity of the 'Barbaric Celt' onto the Irish to 'absolve' Highlander identity of this common perception of Celtic peoples.

Dr Iacocca convincingly argued that the tactics employed by Macpherson in his construction of an imagined past to legitimize contemporary Highland identity was employed by other authors in the 19th century writing against Macpherson, and shares notable similarities with how modern Far-Right groups imagine medieval pasts.

For example, the antiquarian Bp **Thomas Percy** used Macpherson's method to argue against his claims in 'Five Pieces of Runic Poetry' and 'Reliques of Ancient English Poetry'. In these, he reasserts a superior Anglocentric tradition of British identity based on a Gothic racialization of British character, suggesting that British genius, chivalry, and sensibility derives from ancient Gothic tradition. *Hardyknute* by **John Pinkerton** reimagines the identity of the Scottish Lowlander, imagining England and the Scottish Lowlands as equal, connecting Scottish identity with ancient Gothic inheritance, connecting Lowlander Scottish identity with Percy's Gothic-English. In doing so, he creates a racial divide in Scotland, where the Gothic English and Lowlanders dominate the subordinate Celtic Highlanders. **Charlotte Brooke** in *Reliques of Irish Poetry* reinvents Irish bardic sources to challenge accusations of the Irish being 'barbaric'. It uses material from the Ulster Cycle of medieval Irish literature to connect Irish identity with chivalry, and draws on the outdated theory that the Irish are descended from Phoenician settlers to connect Irish identity with a Classical past to legitimize Ireland's capacity for self-government.

Dr Iacocca connects these tactics pioneered by Macpherson with recent White Nationalist Medievalisms. Both reimagine elements of medieval pasts to create existentialist identities relating to race, gender, culture, and pan-Europeanism. Both appeal to heroic sentimentalism, particularly through White Nationalist longings for an imagined medieval golden age of masculinity, whiteness, and often (but not always), Christian dominance. The use of the literature of 'ancient' peoples is used to create a mysterious masculine past where violence is legitimized and valued. The Song of Roland, for instance, being used to justify ethnic cleansing and mass murder by drawing on an imagined version of the 'Reconquista' of Spain, and using this to identify an fundamental, essential difference between Christian Europeans and Muslims, which are imagined as deeply non-European.

DISCUSSION NOTES

The question period that followed Dr Iacocca's paper wound up focusing on several distinct themes, which in retrospect, is particularly helpful for composing this newsletter.

We discussed the process of racialization, and how the criteria of racialization has shifted over time. In particular, we noted the the similarities in how these authors in the 19th century and modern Far-Right groups rely on works of romantic poetry, which is often not as old as they imagine these sources to be. However, we discussed that the 'historical truth' is ultimately negotiable to these groups which instead focus overwhelmingly on the construction of feeling and emotion, and as such, engaging with such groups by challenging the validity of their historical claims is unhelpful. They are not honestly engaging with the past, but fabricating an emotional connection with a past that never was to legitimize their present beliefs, and as such, challenging the validity of the history they base their work on is rarely successful. For instance, see how popular Macpherson's work was despite contemporary scholars noting that it was likely a forgery, while the successful challenges to his work relied on the same appeals to imagined pasts, rather than honest engagement in historical fact.

We also discussed the tenancy of Fascism to 'lose oneself in the crowd' and the appeal of irrationality. Vibes (see our discussion of this term in the October newsletter) are the name of the game, not engaging with critical thought, which inherently goes against the instincts of academics who are trained to base their arguments and critiques in fact rather than emotion. As a consequence of this, academics are poorly equipped to face such appropriations of history, and engaging with such appropriations through mockery, derision, and other methods that play on emotion, while some of the most successful methods of opposition, are not acceptable in academic circles. All of this was in turn linked to **George Bataille's** 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism'.

We also discussed how Ossianic material was ultimately being used as a resistance to imperialism, but that this resistance was ultimately based on nationalist approaches. Discussion grappled with nationalism as a method to resist imperialism, but that this is ultimately playing with fire and that, while it can sometimes be successful (for instance, see Irish nationalism used to resist British colonialism), nationalism itself can be exceptionally dangerous.

As we wrap up this sixth edition of the CARANTES newsletter, we want to remind all of you to take care of yourselves. We approach a difficult time of the year, and with the current situations unfolding across the globe, it is easy for us to become overwhelmed. To use the somewhat cliché metaphor, it is important to put on your mask first if a plane is depressurized before you leap to help others. Burning out or becoming overwhelmed is a real issue. As much as we might dream that our work is a sprint, something that we can rush with the finish line in sight, this is a marathon. Listen to yourself, the needs of your body and mind. Do not be afraid to reach out to your support systems and take time needed to process emotions. You cannot guide others if you yourself are lost.

For now that's all from us here at the CARANTES steering committee. Please feel free to contact us if you have any reactions, thoughts or concerns, or if you would rather not get any more emails.

Until next time, keep well and safe,
And thank you for doing this work with us,
Your friends at



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