

Adam and the 'sublime savage'

Balavil House, Inverness-shire

The home of Allan and Marjorie Macpherson-Fletcher

The notorious literary alchemist James Macpherson created a vision of Adam elegance in the Highlands.

Mary Miers investigates

Photographs by Simon Jauncey

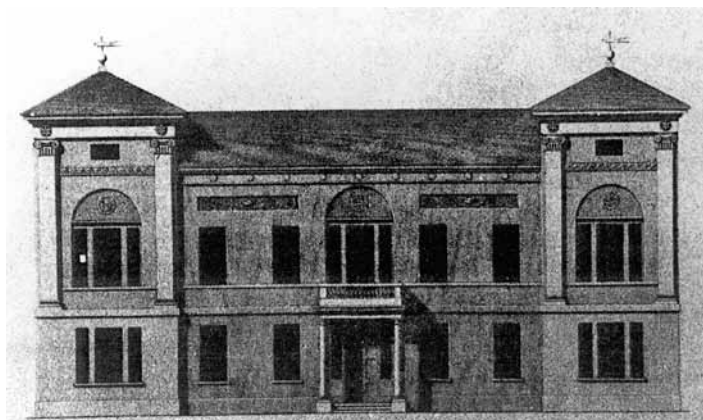
RISING from the top of a steep park overlooking the Spey valley, Balavil is an arresting landmark for anybody driving through the central Highlands on the A9. The sight of the pavilioned south front standing proud against dark Craighuie rarely fails to arouse interest as the dual carriageway slices through its lower park between the lodge and the former drive. Yet, for all its eye-catching presence, Balavil is surprisingly little known. It was built by the Adam brothers for James Macpherson, 'author'/translator' of the Ossian poems and orchestrator of the greatest literary controversy of the 18th century. Macpherson's literary endeavours will forever associate Balavil with one of the most emotive chapters in the history of Scottish Nationalism and the Romantic Movement.

An ancient settlement, Balavil is named from the Gaelic *Bail'-a' bhile*. The present building replaced a house of the Mackintoshes, the external appearance of which was 'by no means equal to what it had been represented on paper, except in the prospect of sport', thought Col Thomas Thornton, who rented it in 1786. '[I] would willingly have been off on any terms, and have lived in camp, had I not engaged it at the desire of my friends... I had no alternative, therefore took it with all its servants, gardens, grass,

conveniences, and inconveniences,' he wrote in *A Sporting Tour* (1804), a lively account of shooting and fishing his way through Britain. Thornton holidayed in lavish style: he hired a frigate to transport his hawks, hounds, gun bearers and other cargo and erected tented encampments in the hills, from where he entertained the local gentry.

James Macpherson, the builder of the present house, was, by this time, a national celebrity. Not only did he claim to have rediscovered and translated into English the ancient poetry of the legendary warrior bard Ossian, but he had also provided Scotland with a Celtic Homer at a time of national crisis. His publications of the 1760s and 1770s brought success and notoriety, but it was not his literary pursuits so much as his subsequent career in government spin-doctoring, backstairs politics and serving as agent to the Nawab of Arcot that made him rich.

With his friend John Macpherson (whose accession in 1785 to the post of Governor-General of India he orchestrated), he operated a sort of protection racket for a Highland mafia in India. He supported, but also deceived, his compatriots, notably his cousin Allan Macpherson, whom he swindled in a complicated financial tangle that left Allan bankrupt and himself the owner of Raitts, as Balavil was then known. His reputation >



← Fig 1 left:
Adam's design for
the south front,
published in
Stieglitz's *Plans
Et Dessins Tirés
de la Belle Archi-
tecture* (1800).

→ Fig 2 right:
The south front,
looking out over
the Spey valley
to the Glenfeshie
and Gaick hills





in the city besmirched, he now focused on setting himself up as a laird in his native Badenoch, adding another Macpherson property, Banchor, to the lands of Raitts, Phoness, Etterick and Inverhaven. Macpherson named his new Highland estate Belleville.

Whatever his business dealings, 'Fingal', as he was known, was popular locally. He helped his kinsman and chief, Macpherson of Cluny, to regain his ancestral lands after the 'forty-five and to quash a rival claim to the chiefship and, although excluded from the best society and described by Mrs Grant of Laggan as 'gross, callous, and awkward', he was known to be a generous landlord. 'Now that he had got all his schemes of interest and ambition fulfilled, he seemed to reflect and grow domestic.' Mrs Grant's letters record Macpherson entertaining liberally at Balavil from 1788, suggesting that he must have occupied another house here while his new mansion was being built.

6 Balavil will forever be associated with an emotive chapter in the history of Scottish Nationalism 9

'I am involved in stones and mortar at Raitts, and I partly repent of the magnitude of my Castle' he wrote in a letter of 1790; 'The truth is that Adam's plan did not appear so large in my eyes on paper as on the hill, on which the House is rising. But I have gone too far to stop with any credit to myself.' Given the Highland setting and his taste for the Romantic, one might have expected Macpherson to choose one of Adam's castle designs. But the neo-Classical mansion he built in the wilds of Badenoch is perhaps a more telling reflection of his complex character.

Adam and Macpherson knew each other socially; both had risen to success in London under the patronage of their fellow Scot, Lord Bute, and Adam possessed many of his client's publications. He had already designed for Macpherson some castellated additions for his Gothick villa in Putney and, in 1788, a thatched lodge called Tullysoul, which he possibly intended as a farmhouse (it was probably never built).

Adam prepared two unexecuted schemes for Balavil, dated January and March 1790. The drawings, now in the Soane Collection, show how he envisaged firstly remodelling the existing house and secondly replacing it with a five-bay house flanked by lower pavilions. The executed design, which cost £4,000 to build, combines elements of both.



↑ Fig 3: The hall, hung with hunting trophies and comfortably furnished as an Edwardian 'living hall'. It was remodelled after the 1903 fire by MacGibbon & Ross

It is mainly a modified version of the latter, but with varying heights in the end bays and central block—rare in Adam's Classical work. The original drawings are missing, presumably because the German architectural historian Christian Ludwig Stieglitz, who published them in 1800 (Fig 1), borrowed and never returned them. Given that Adam's Balavil design is not his most distinguished, it is possible that the rage for Ossian on the Continent played a part in Stieglitz's decision to publish it.

Little of the interior of this house survives, as a fire destroyed it in 1903. But we

know the plan from a set of undated survey drawings probably done in 1823, when the mason James Russell built a low service range to the east. They show how the arrangement differed from the published Adam plan, with the main staircase and entrance hall shoehorned into a relatively tight two-bay space. Along the south range were the library, dining room and a bedroom, west of the stairhall a bedroom and business room, and to its east the service stair and domestic quarters. The drawing room and interconnecting ante room occupied the south range of the *piano nobile* above, with bedrooms in



the flanking pavilion bays. To what degree this scheme was finished is not known. John Adam supervised the project after his brother's death in 1792, but then, in 1796, Macpherson himself died at Balavil.

He never married, but had four children by different women and it was through his daughter Juliet and her husband, the eminent scientist and inventor of the kaleidoscope Sir David Brewster, that Balavil eventually passed. 'The interior of Belleville House is handsomely furnished, and contains an excellent portrait of the poet... by Sir Joshua Reynolds. A view of the house and grounds >

↑ Fig 4 above:
The drawing room, refitted in 1904.

↓ Fig 5 below:
The gun room, as created by the present owners. (It was originally the butler's room).

→ Fig 6 right: **The morning room, with fittings from the 1904 restoration**





↑ Fig 7: The dining room, which was refitted in 1904. The marble chimneypiece is late Adam-revival, with a Georgian grate

by Thomson of Duddingston, and two private portraits, also ornament the walls. In the drawing-room is a small enamel portrait of Macpherson, the duplicate of one painted for the Nabob of Arcot, also by Sir Joshua... In the library is a curious trio of small volumes presented in 1785 by the Prince of Wales (George IV) to the poet,' wrote Robert Carruthers in *The Highland Note-Book* (1843).

What internal work was done at Balavil in the 19th century is not recorded. The architect Charles Kinnear, who co-founded the Photographic Society of Scotland in 1856 with Brewster of Balavil and the architects David Bryce and David MacGibbon, was involved at Balavil in the early 1860s, but almost the only legacy of Peddie &

‘ With the former contents back in situ, Balavil has regained its Victorian atmosphere ’

Kinnear's work here is the Italianate lodge of 1864; there is no evidence that the firm did anything significant in the house itself.

During the occupancy of David Edward Brewster-Macpherson, Balavil operated as a typical Highland Victorian country house, with copious amounts of shooting and entertaining. In 1878, it passed to his son,

Charles Julian, whose marriage in 1880 to Lucy Baxter brought a welcome supply of Dundee wealth in the form of £10,000 a year.

In 1899, the couple employed the Inverness architect William Laidlaw Carruthers to Victorianise Balavil, which disfigured the Adam elevations. They added the balustraded porch and an attic floor over the main five-bay block, and, on the south front, lengthened the attic windows in the pavilion ends and added balustrading and pedimented attic dormers. At about this time, the principal rooms (*Fig 4*) were moved to the ground floor and a living hall (*Fig 3*) created.

The fire broke out on Christmas Eve, 1903. Photographs show chimneypieces and other contents laid out on the lawns



Left James Macpherson (1736–96), by Romney. Right Macpherson left £500 in his will for a monument. In a letter dated July 14, 1796, John Bacon RA suggests he was responsible for this Classical memorial to the poet, near the West Lodge



Genius or fraud?

James Macpherson's intense Highland pride was incubated during his boyhood at Ruthven in the aftermath of the 'forty five, when the death knell of his native Gaelic culture had begun to sound. The lad o' pairts had a taste of greater opportunity when studying classics at Aberdeen, but, by 1756, he was back in the hamlet of Ruthven working as a schoolteacher, writing poems and furthering his amateur acquaintance with old Gaelic poetry under the influence of poet Lachlan Macpherson. Escape from obscurity came through the Edinburgh literati, who received his 'translations' of ancient verse with rapture. Following the publication of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), Macpherson toured the Highlands and Islands collecting material as the basis for his next volumes, which claimed to be translations of a long-lost epic by Ossian, the legendary 3rd-century, blind warrior-bard, whom he presented as a historical figure. Acclaim turned to controversy as the London literati became sceptical; Dr Johnson pronounced him a 'mountebank, liar, fraud'. The verse was, indeed, largely fabricated, although it incorporated fragments of genuine oral and literary material transmitted through Highland culture from its Irish origins. But it struck a chord with the mood of the day and was a sensation at home and abroad. From 1764, Macpherson turned to political lobbying and colonial interests, later becoming an MP. Aloof and proud, he engaged in unscrupulous business practices and grew rich in London, his foot firmly planted in the corridors of power. When he died, he was buried beside Robert Adam in Westminster Abbey.

and the majority of contents were saved, but all the internal finishes were lost. Rebuilding to the tune of £14,500 was carried out by MacGibbon & Ross in 1904, an altogether less sensitive scheme than the firm's rehabilitation of Sir William Bruce's Kinross House of the same date. Ceilings, plasterwork and joinery were reinstated in an Adam style (Fig 6), sometimes, as on the hall ceiling, mixed with 17th-century detail. The first-floor windows on the entrance front were altered, the east wing raised and a pyramid-roofed stair tower added. On the south front, a flimsy imitation of an orangery was attached, now removed and reused as an internal screen, and ground-floor bay windows were introduced (Fig 2).

After the Second World War and occupation

by the army, Balavil was closed up for 20 years, and Harry Brewster-Macpherson, a great sportsman, photographer and ornithologist, set up in another residence on the estate with his wife, Peggy. She continued to keep the house wind- and watertight after his death in 1947, and it is through her that Balavil passed to the present owner, her nephew Allan Macpherson-Fletcher. He spent many childhood holidays at Balavil and remembers wandering the empty rooms under the silent gaze of stags' heads.

In 1966, the London businessman and war hero Sir Tommy Macpherson took a 25-year repairing lease on Balavil, and he and his wife, Jean, made the house habitable again (the decoration of the principal rooms is theirs (Fig 7)). However, a number

of alterations during this time included the demolition of the 1899 billiard-room wing.

Mr Macpherson-Fletcher inherited in 1975, but he and his wife, Marjorie, did not move into the main house until 1993. They faced a considerable challenge, for Balavil was in a poor state. A programme of repairs and modernisation included restoring the derelict east wing and introducing new bedrooms and bathrooms, opening up the original kitchens to make one large family room, now the nerve centre of the house, and creating a nursery in the cellar. With the former contents back in situ and a new gun room (Fig 5) and billiard room, Balavil has regained its Victorian atmosphere: it combines the feeling of a Highland shooting lodge with that of a comfortable family home. 🐾