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George MacDonald: A Novelist for All Times

Georgette Lormant

The following article was too long in its original form to be included without some abridgement. We present it in a condensed form, believing we have been faithful to the author's main line of argument.

In spite of his ceaseless travels MacDonald remained a Celt his whole life. Greville, his son, remembers how proudly his father wore the tartan of his clan. We must constantly remember his Highland background, the wild windswept land, last bulwark of the Celtic clans, cradle of his ancestors and source of his genius.

Like all Highlanders MacDonald believed in second sight, and he featured it in one of his novels, *The Portent*. Premonitions and ghosts are mentioned frequently in his stories. If his Protestant intellect gave them a rational explanation, his Celtic awareness remained interested in them as supernatural manifestations, and he also fascinated his readers. We find mysterious rooms in old castles whence come bloodcurdling shrieks, sepulchral chapels which conceal sinister dramas, somnambulist girls in white walking the night like ghosts, strange lights shining through windows . . .

Obsessed by the world beyond the grave, MacDonald looks to the sunset, where the Celts believed was the dwelling of the dead, the Fortunate Islands, the country of eternal youth. His Celtic imagination sees portents and symbols where others see nothing. His religion, like that of the Celts, has a strong pantheistic element. Forests bent by the tempests, the most humble flower, are **[end of page 3]** alike signs of the divine presence. In his tales and in some of the novels we find the ancient beliefs and superstitions of the Celts.

In *Phantastes*, for example, the hero is often welcomed by women who give him advice, protect him from danger, or warn him not to disobey the prohibition or *geis* set upon him. In Celtic mythology a woman or a fairy is often the means of introduction to the Other World. And we find not only fairies and goblins, but also fairy trees, especially the Ash and the Alder. These are sacred in Indo-European mythology.

In *Lilith* there are cats who embody devils; there are countless witches in Scottish and Irish legend who change themselves into cats to work

their magic spells. Vane goes to the Other World through a mirror; crystal and glass were considered instruments of divination by the Celts. Fairy fortresses were often called glass palaces. The Raven who introduces Vane to the Other World is a sacred bird, too, the emblem of the Fir Bolg, the enemies of the Tuatha de Danaan. The Gaels believed this bird could foretell the future.

In *The Golden Key* and *The Princess and Curdie* we have the Celtic theme of a task given to a hero; and the Celtic concept of the half-witted being in communication with the Other World is to be found in *At the Back of the North Wind*. Light and darkness, celestial or subterranean worlds, forests, caverns, mountains, animals, birds, stars, moon and sun: the whole cosmos has a hidden and divine sense, teaches the path of wisdom, is an esoteric invitation to the Other World familiar to the Celts. [4]

MacDonald was deeply rooted in the past, as a member of the most powerful and biggest Highland clan, whose origins were both Celtic and Scandinavian—and mythological, too. The Scandinavian ancestors of the clan claimed their descent from the goddess Freya, and had as their badge the boat of Nerthus, a male manifestation of Freya.

He referred to a more recent past, the Glencoe Massacre, in his novels *Malcolm* and *The Marquis of Lossie*. Duncan MacPhail hates the Campbells for the part they played in that affair. MacDonald describes the Gaelic love of costume and colour, poetry and nature, and the appeal the supernatural has for them; and he dwells on the feeling of all Highlanders for their equality within the clan system:

“If aal wass here as it used to wass in ta Highlants, my lort,” said Duncan, “when every clansman wass son or prother or father to his chief, tat would pe tifferent; but my poy must *not* co and eat with serfants who haf nothing put teir waches to make tem love and obey your lortship. If her poy serfs another man, it must pe pecause he loves him, and looks upon him as his chief, who will shake haands with him and take ta father’s care of him.” (*Malcolm* ch. 32, p. 198)

All his life MacDonald remained faithful to the Scottish dialect, spoken not only by peasants, but by aristocrats, teachers and ministers—the symbol of the nation. He praises it in *Alec Forbes*:

I do not however allow that the Scotch is a patois in the ordinary sense of the word. For had not Scotland a living literature, and that a high one, when England could produce none, or next to none? (*Alec Forbes* ch 24, p 107)

Neither does MacDonald forget his Highland descent, and the importance of Scotland's first language, the Gaelic— [5]

that language, soft as the speech of streams from rugged mountains, and wild as that of the wind in the tops of fir trees, the language at once of lords and fighting men. (*Sir Gibbie* ch 23, p. 132)

MacDonald praises the Celtic peasant for his manners and breeding, and his proud sobriety. In *Donal Grant*, for example, he writes,

With us Highlanders it is a point of breeding not to mind what sort of dinner we have, but to eat as heartily of bread and cheese as of roast-beef. (*Donal Grant* ch 31, p. 149)

He points out the Gael's over-sensitiveness and warlike temperament. He himself was like his hero Malcolm in this respect:

Now one of the weaknesses Malcolm owed his Celtic blood was an utter impatience of rudeness. In his own nature entirely courteous, he was wrathful even to absurdity at the slightest suspicion of insult. (*The Marquis of Lossie* ch 11, p. 86)

MacDonald evokes Scotland's past more precisely still in *What's Mine's Mine*, which deals with the depopulation of the Highlands through greed on the part of the new Sassenach landlords and a dissatisfaction with their old way of life on the part of the tenants:

If the heads of the people had but lived pure, active, sober, unostentatious lives, satisfied to be poor, poverty would never have overwhelmed them! The highlands would have made Scotland great with the greatness of men dignified by high-hearted contentment, and strong with the strength of men who could do without. (*What's Mine's Mine* p. 344)

The hero, MacRuadh, has done all he can to keep his tenants on the land at a low rent, but they have left, and the land has become a waste. MacDonald condemns the cupidity and money-lust which are at the bottom of our consumer society. Through MacRuadh he expresses his own ideal: [6]

He was filled with the notion of doing something in his own person and family, having the remnant of the clan for the nucleus of his endeavour, to restore to a vital reality, let it be of smallest extent, that most ancient of governments, the patriarchal, which all around had rotted into the feudal, in its turn rapidly disintegrating into the mere dust and ashes of the kingdom of the dead, over which Mammon reigns supreme.

(*What's Mine's Mine* p. 25)

However, MacDonald knows that the past is over, that the old customs cannot come back unless

administered upon loftier principles—must begin afresh, and be wrought out afresh from the bosom of a new Abraham. (*Ibid*, p. 26)

MacDonald can no longer contend for his clan or even for Scotland, ruined as it is by discontent with poverty. So he will become the champion of Christ and preach his evangelical ideal. The old Scottish clan system will yield place to the heavenly kingdom, to the society where Christ is Chieftain.

In the patriarchal concept of Scottish society the father plays a leading part. It is the father who is chief of the clan. Robert Lee Wolff, in *The Golden Key*, suggests that MacDonald suffered from an Oedipus complex, that he hated his father, and even all men. Such an opinion is untenable. Nothing in the life of the author can prove it. On the contrary, the father-figure in MacDonald is a symbol not of tyrannical authority but of tenderness. Trust has to reign between father and son; where there is no trust there is no true love or obedience. *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* illustrates the failure of the father/child relationship. Thomas Weir has brought up his son and daughter with uncompromising harshness, and in the action of the novel refuses to see them, [7] because his son has been dismissed from his work and his daughter has an illegitimate child. Thomas makes no attempt to bring them back into the right path. It is not his fatherly love which is wounded, but his egoism and pride—egoism which is at the root of so many sins, as MacDonald sees it. He well understands that lack of confidence in and hatred for one's father is often the origin of a man's revolt against his Creator. In several of his novels he depicts sons who react positively, not negatively, to their bad fathers. Robert Falconer and Malcolm both have to redeem the wickedness of their fathers. In *Guild Court*, when Tom has been discovered embezzling from the bank where he works, Fuller advises him:

“Pray to your Father, my boy. He will change your humiliation into humility, your shame into purity.”

“Oh, if he were called anything else than Father! I am afraid I hate my father.”

“I don't wonder. But that is your own fault too.”

“How is that, Sir? Surely you are making me out worse than I am.”

“No. You are afraid of him. As soon as you have ceased to be

afraid of him, you will no longer be in danger of hating him.”
(*Guild Court* ch 8, p. 169-170)

In his works MacDonald also deals with the feminine issue. He never discusses the equality of men and women; for him the debate is on a different level. It is evident that he was not a feminist in the modern sense of the word. Modern feminism exalts the woman's self above moral and social taboos, and MacDonald was opposed to indulgence of self. He began by assuming that women's [8] [9] [Note: image not available] moral delicacy was superior to that of men. As he says in *Guild Court*,

Good women, in their supposed ignorance of men's wickedness, are not unfrequently like the angels, in that they understand it perfectly, without the knowledge soiling one feather of their wings. (*Guild Court* Bk. 2, ch. 2, 23-24)

In *The Seaboard Parish* he explains the love between a husband and wife with the help of theological language:

I was law, she was grace. But grace often yielded to law, and law sometimes yielded to grace. (*The Seaboard Parish* ch. 2, p. 26)

In the same novel he discusses women's rights, and claims a better education for them—although he also says,

I should not like to see any woman I cared much for in parliament or in an anatomical class-room.

In *Paul Faber, Surgeon* he criticises men who demand moral perfection and purity in women while being less exacting towards themselves. We find the same situation in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and the same condemnation of men's fatuity and egoism.

MacDonald's attitude to women can be summarised by this remark from *The Flight of the Shadow*:

She had a regard for women's dignity as profound as silent. She was not of those that prate or rave about their rights, forget their duties, and care only for what they count their victories. (*The Flight of the Shadow* ch. 2, p. 8)

The rights of women as well as those of men are subordinate to their duties towards God.

MacDonald cared, too, about animal welfare. He believed they would find in another world compensation for the tortures and cruelties inflicted on them in this life. [10] He was faithful to the teaching of St Paul, who in his Epistle to the Romans (ch. 8, vs. 18-24) says that the resurrection will be

cosmic. In *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* MacDonald says of the mare his father liked so much,

I believe he was never quite without a hope that somehow or other he should find her again in the next world. At all events I am certain that it was hard for him to believe that so much wise affection should have been created to be again uncreated. (*Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* ch. 23, p. 180)

And we find in *Paul Faber, Surgeon* a wholehearted condemnation of vivisection, with these admirable lines:

Who, what is the man who would dare live a life wrung from the agonies of tortured innocents? Against the will of my maker, live by a means that are an abhorrence to his soul! Such a life must be all in the flesh! The spirit could have little share therein. Could it be even a life of the flesh that came-of treason against essential animality! It could but be an abnormal monstrous existence, that sprung, toadstool-like, from the blood-marsh of cruelty—a life neither spiritual nor fleshly, but devilish. (*Paul Faber, Surgeon* ch. 27, p. 231)

We will retain the word “devilish” as a symbol of our times, which have given legal sanction to such crimes as abortion, vivisection and, soon, euthanasia—which MacDonald condemned in *Mary Marston*.

We see in the works of MacDonald how the constant thought of failure and death is transfigured by a living faith. Many of his heroes are painfully marked by their awareness of human failure. Some are clergyman, as was MacDonald himself for a short period. The young clergyman of *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* almost drives Catharine Weir to suicide by his well-meaning interference. Thomas Wingfold, the curate, feels heavily the weight of [11] responsibility, hampered as he is by religious doubt.

Like Walton, he turns to God for help:

Was there, could there be, a living heart to the universe that did positively hear him—poor, misplaced, dishonest, ignorant Thomas Wingfold, who had presumed to undertake a work he neither could perform nor had the courage to forsake, when out of the misery of the grimy little cellar of his consciousness he cried aloud for light and something to make a man of him? (*Thomas Wingfold, Curate* ch. 2, p. 54)

The answer for Thomas, and George MacDonald, is “just to hide yourself in God, as the child would hide from the dark in the folds of his mother’s

mantle.” Little by little MacDonald finds his way to spiritual childhood. To moan about our failure and helplessness is in fact pride; but if we are too weak for anything else, let us at least remember that there is a God who suffers like us, and if the doubt continues, we must hide ourselves in him.

If the good man knows failure, the sinner also knows failure that will lead first to annihilation of conscience and then to death. It is for this reason that criminals in MacDonald are often drug addicts, with wills and consciences already weakened by abuse. Leopold, in *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*, is a drug addict and a murderer. It is important to notice that he is saved not by the doctor but by the curate, the religious man. For MacDonald drug addicts and criminals are responsible for their deeds, yet society also must bear its responsibility. Wingfold says,

Until we love our brother—yes, until we love our enemy,
who is yet our brother—we contain within ourselves the
undeveloped germ of murder. (*Thomas Wingfold, Curate* ch. 67
p. 341)

Divine Love—religion—is able to cure a psychic disorder better than psychiatry.

MacDonald was haunted his whole life by the phantom of Death, and we will see how he exorcised it. In *Within and [12] Without* and *A Hidden Life* he shows through the examples of light and darkness, day and night, and so on, how death has a hidden side. In *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* he says,

The sun never sinks into the grave It is just as true of
the sun as of a man, for that no man sinks into the grave. He
only disappears. Life is a constant sunrise, which death cannot
interrupt, any more than the night can swallow up the sun.
(*Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* ch. 1, pp. 23-24)

The Christian’s comfort is the death of Christ. God allowed his Son to die. MacDonald says,

If this was true, this was to be a God indeed. Well might he call
on us to endure, who had himself borne the far heavier share.
(*The Vicar’s Daughter* bk. 3 ch 33. p. 104)

In *The Marquis of Lossie* Christ’s death is a picture of
the suffering of the Father himself in bringing sons and
daughters through the cleansing and glorifying fires, without
which the created cannot be made the very children of God,
partakers of the divine nature and peace. (*The Marquis of Lossie*

ch. 12, pp. 147-148)

Faith in God's love and in the triumph of his Son over the grave is the only way to come to terms with death.

MacDonald's characters are like real human beings; they doubt, they suffer, they commit crimes. They are responsible beings with a free will, not machines ruled by their nerves, by fate, heredity or environment. MacDonald shows us human passions and the moral chaos they can create as a result of morbid self-exaltation. He demonstrates that self-worship is at the root of the soul's sufferings—worship of that self which Pascal said was the enemy and rival of self, because the only self is God. [13]

Even more than the nineteenth century, ours is a period of doubts, of anguish, of passionate research, of painful negation. The primary question is that of the place of man in the universe. For the great majority of our contemporaries materialism is the only possible explanation. God does not exist save as a myth created by man to exorcise his fears.

How does MacDonald approach the question of God's existence? He told his son Greville that he could not accept a God provable by weight and measure. No man can speak of God unless he is inspired by the Holy Spirit. He quotes Behmen's *Aurora* in *David Elginbrod*:

When the soul is kindled or enlightened by the Holy Ghost,
then it beholds what God its father does, as a son beholds what
his father does at home in his own house.

The divine existence cannot be revealed to human reason, to merely intellectual powers. Only in the light of the Spirit can it show itself, by revelation through facts:

But in every one of them is a secret chamber, to which God
has access from behind by a hidden door, while they know
nothing of this chamber; and the other door towards their own
consciousness is hidden by darkness and wrong and ruin of all
kinds. Sometimes they become dimly aware that there must be
such a door. Some of us search for it, find it, turn back aghast,
while God is standing behind the door waiting to be found, and
ready to hold forth the arms of eternal tenderness to him who
will open and look. Some of us have torn the door open and lo!
there is the Father, at the heart of us, at the heart of all things.
(*Adela Cathcart* bk. 2, ch. 1, pp. 59, 60)

God is for MacDonald the *Deus Absconditus*, the hidden God known by all the mystics, and who surrenders himself only in the secret of the heart, when

the soul has made a silence in its deepest self. Yet there may be no certainty in faith. Like Donal Grant MacDonald sometimes doubted whether his prayers were heard: **[14]**

What if there should come to him no answer? How frightful then would be his loneliness! But to seem not to be heard might be part of the discipline of his darkness! If might be for the perfection of his faith that he must not yet know how near God was to him. (*Donal Grant* ch. 12, p. 119)

“The night of the faith,” “the obscure night”—these are expressions well known to the mystics, and remind us of St. John of the Cross.” One must pass through the darkness of faith to attain the supreme enlightenment. MacDonald concludes with St. Theresa of Avila, “Dios solo basta”—God is enough, he said, and sat in peace. (*Ibid.*)

However, by education and ethic our novelist is out of fashion. The Freudian and Marxist ideologies of our Western intelligentsia are opposed to MacDonald’s affirmations. So, more than being a man of our time, MacDonald is a man of the future, looking beyond our civilisation and our century.

Andre Malraux says that “the twenty-first century will be religious or will not be.” The twentieth century has been one not of religion but of negation. Sartre, Camus, Ionesco and Beckett have taught us that our world is without meaning. Others have given only economic or political explanations for the evils of society.

But MacDonald was not a political man. If he criticised the power of commercialism and money it was not in the name of any party or ideology. He did not believe in a change of structure, but thought that every man in his place, however humble, could change the world. He put the accent on the cause of Western society’s decadence and rottenness—the worship of money, the domination of the world by financial powers. So he depicts businessmen and **[15]** wealthy shopkeepers as vulgar beings not only in manners but in heart and soul. He remarks on

a coarseness not of the social so much as of the spiritual nature—in a word—genuine selfishness . . . ; but it was long before I could get sufficiently accustomed to their vile-ness . . . to keep from leaving the room when a vein of that sort was opened. (*Adela Cathcart* ch. 2, p. 53)

MacDonald condemned not only commercialism but also industrialism in *Saint George and Saint Michael*. Lord Herbert, a nobleman

infatuated with alchemical discoveries, does not consider the era he is inaugurating, nor

. . . the irreverence and pride and destruction that were about to follow in his footsteps, wasting, defiling, scarring, obliterating, turning beauty into ashes, and worse! That divine mechanics should thus, through selfishness and avarice, be leagued with filth and squalor and ugliness. (*Saint George and Saint Michael* ch. 59, p. 230)

MacDonald seems to support the poor against the rich. He believes that the world has been created for the poor: the wealthy are disadvantaged by their wickedness and spiritual poverty, and are only on earth to help the spiritual development and liberation of the poor. It is the latter who will inherit the earth and the heavenly kingdom.

Nevertheless, in *There and Back* MacDonald assures us that the working man can be as wicked as the capitalist, if he wants only to be wealthy like him. The worker may perish like the two hundred men of Coleridge's poem, and the wealthy man may be the one to be saved like the Ancient Mariner. MacDonald also says this:

Alas for the man who degrades his poverty by worshipping wealth: there is no abyss in hell too deep for him to find its bottom. (*Mary Marston* bk. 1, ch. 20, p. 225) **[16]**

MacDonald's scorn for and condemnation of money is not at all like the manichean concept of Communism—on one side the good poor people and on the other the evil rich. He cannot be claimed as a prophet by any political ideology. He looks deeper, into the heart of man, seeing there the causes of evil—and also the hope of change for the future. Capitalism and Communism belong to the old, weary world. They are opposed to the Divine youth and dynamism enjoyed by the messianic characters in MacDonald's works.

So we see, from this survey of MacDonald's thought as expressed in his novels, how a timeless quality pervades his work. Timeless, that is, in the sense of being relevant to all periods. His roots in the past as a Celt, his immediacy as a commentator on his contemporary world, and above all his faithfulness to eternal verities, combine to make him an author for all readers—in the past, the present and the future. **[17]**