

Orts: The George MacDonald Society Newsletter

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The George MacDonald Society

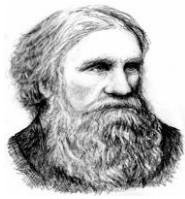
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Orts

The George MacDonald Society Newsletter, No. 16, May 1989

1. **MacDonald and Blake.** Adrian Thomas has come up with the answer to our query in ORTS 15 about William Blake. The quotation is from Plate 77 of *Jerusalem*, and was printed thus:

Plate 77
To the Christians

Devils are	I give you the end of a
False religions	golden string, Only wind it
“Saul, Saul,	into a ball,
“Why persecutest	It will lead you in at
thou me?”	Heaven’s gate
	Built in Jerusalem’s wall.

It would be interesting to trace the influence of Blake upon MacDonald, bearing in mind the fact that Blake’s manuscripts were rare even in his own lifetime. The passage following Plate 77 of *Jerusalem* includes this, which is very similar to MacDonald’s views expressed in his essay on the Imagination, published in *A Dish of Orts*:

I know of no other Christianity and no other gospel than the liberty both of body and mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination, Imagination, the real and eternal world of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow, and in which we shall live in our Eternal or Imaginative bodies when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more.

And Blake’s description of a fairy funeral (as given by Allan Cunningham in his “Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors and Architects”, Vol II, 1830) compares most intriguingly with MacDonald’s account in Ch III of *Phantastes*:

“Did you ever see a fairy’s funeral, madam?” he once said to a lady, who happened to sit by him in company. “Never, sir!” was the answer. “I have,” said Blake, “but not before last night. I was walking alone in my garden, there was a great stillness among the branches and flowers and more than common sweetness in the air; I heard a low and pleasant sound, and I knew not whence it came. At last I saw the broad leaf of a flower move, and underneath I saw a procession of creatures of the size and colour of green and gray grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose leaf, which they buried with songs and then disappeared. It was a fairy funeral.”

MacDonald may have been introduced to Blake by Ruskin, but he may also have discovered him through Blair’s *The Grave*, for which Blake executed 12 designs. The original of MacDonald’s bookplate, “Death’s Door”, is one of these. The *Antijacobin Review* for Nov. 1808 comments:

Death’s door is delineated as a square aperture opening into a rocky recess, into which an aged man, his hair and garment blown forward by the wind, is represented as entering. In this figure the feebleness of age is well depicted, and there is a chasteness and simplicity in it which we vainly seek for in the “renovated man seated in light and glory”. The latter excites the idea of pain, and his posture is that of a naked madman rather than that of an inhabitant of the realms of bliss.

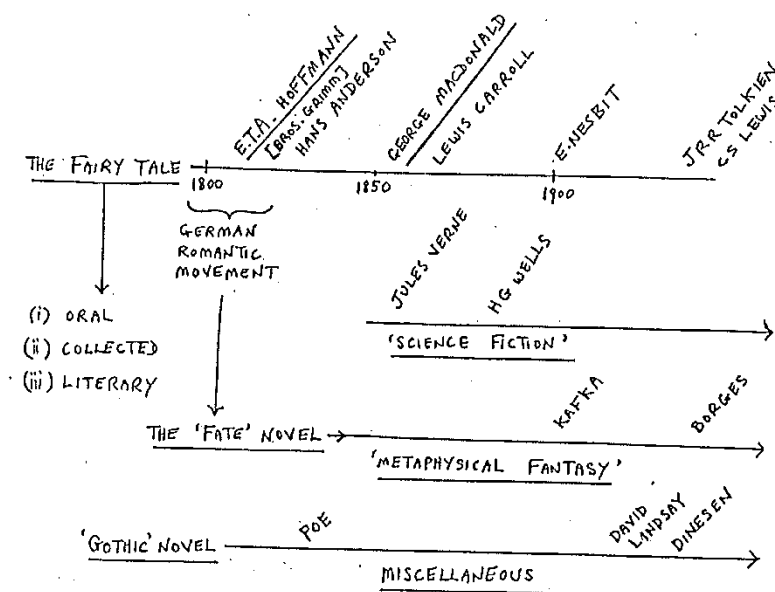
Here is Blake's design, executed by Schiavonetti for The Grave



North Wind

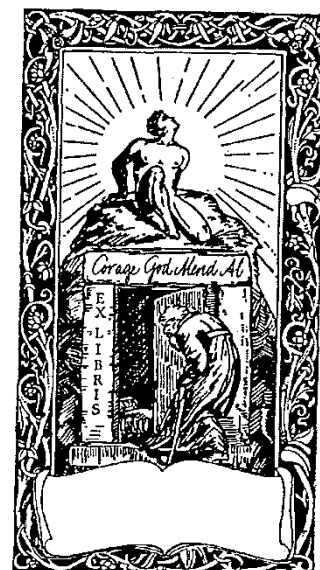
Journal of George MacDonald Society

The editor of North Wind apologises to readers and to the author, Raphael Shaberman, for the omission of the following diagram from the article "George MacDonald and ETA Hoffman" in North Wind.



MacDonald's book plate derived from Blake's design.

Redesigned bookplate, printed in the Sunrise Centenary Edition of MacDonald's works.



2. **J.B. Priestley and MacDonald.** Ch.11 of Priestley's novel Bright Day contains the following allusion to Phantastes:

"I know now I just don't like these oldish people who are rather rich. There's something the matter with them . . . They must be all peculiar inside – half-dead or something . . . Like those wooden dummy people in the fairy story by George MacDonald – they'd just knock you about without even knowing they were doing it."

(p. 329 in our 1948 Reprint Society ed.)

If members come across any other references to MacDonald or his works, do please let us know!

3. **Cross-Border Studies.** The English Association informs us that they regularly take note of North Wind in their annual report The Year's Work in English Studies. "We also," says the Editor, Laurel Brake, "attempt to provide detailed reviews of the work on the author that your newsletter treats." If any member would like to contact the English Association, the address is The Vicarage, Priory Gardens, London W4 1TT, UK.

4. **The Spectator** for 18th March 1989 carried the following item on George MacDonald. We thank them for permission to include it in ORTS.

GEORGE MACDONALD

*This is the sixth in our Lent series on
British spiritual writers.*

GEORGE Macdonald was a heretic. That at least was the judgment of the dissenting chapel in Arundel where he had served as a minister for two years. The charges against him were that he proposed a period of probation for heathens after this life and that he was infected by German theology. They tried to force him out by reducing his stipend, but he merely shrugged his shoulders and tightened his belt. A year later the attempted expulsion succeeded. For the rest of his life he supported his large family, sometimes near starvation, chiefly by writing. One of his guiding principles was to accept everything he could not change as the will of God. His life was the history of an escape from Calvinism, not, like Samuel Butler into rationalism, but into a filial reliance upon God.

Macdonald (who lived from 1824 to 1905) was a mystic who best expressed his insights by means of fairy-tales and what have been called "mythopoeic" stories. His best known myth-like story is *Phantastes*, which C. S. Lewis said baptised his imagination, when by chance he bought it at a station book-stall. Chesterton said *The Princess and the Goblin* "made a difference to my whole existence". Macdonald's novels are not consistently readable: in Chesterton's words, "a casual reader may wish there was less of Blake and more of Keats".

The following extract comes from his second series of *Unspoken Sermons*:

Lest it should be possible that any unchild-like soul might in arrogance and ignorance, think to stand upon his rights *against* God, and demand of Him this or that after the will or the flesh. I will lay before such a possible one some of the things to which he has a right . . . He has a claim to be compelled to repent; to be hedged in on every side: to have one after another of the strong sharp-toothed sheep-dogs or the Great Shepherd sent after him, to thwart him in any desire, foil him in any plan, frustrate him of any hope, until he come to see at length that nothing will ease his pain, nothing make life a thing worth having, but the presence or the living God within him.

A biography of George MacDonald was published by his son, Greville, in 1924. Phantastes is published in paper-back by Dent and by Lion. At the Back of the North Wind, The Princess and the Goblin, and The Princess and Curdie are published by Penguin. In 1946 C.S. Lewis edited an anthology from Macdonald's works.

5. **1662 Society Meeting:** "Animals and Theology", 7.30 pm, Monday June 5th, City Temple, Holborn Viaduct, LONDON EC1.

6. "Orts" is published by the George MacDonald Society, & is edited by Kathy and Tony Triggs, 22 Sherwood Close, Bingley, W Yorks, BD16 3EL