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John Pridmore

Those who have fallen under the spell of George MacDonald and who have wanted to find out more about him have not until now found it easy to satisfy their curiosity. Greville MacDonald's biography of his parents, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, is an inaccessible volume—and that not only because copies are rarely found. There is, alas, an almost Victorian prolixity and piety about it which leaves the reader with the misgiving that, however much we have been told, we have not heard the whole story. Kathy Triggs tells us that Greville's book has been reissued in the United States, but those interested in MacDonald's story (as well as his stories) would be well advised to begin with *The Stars and the Stillness*. This biography meets the need that many of us have long felt for a straightforward account of MacDonald's life and faith. Here at last is a book to commend to those who have been led by their delight in MacDonald's writings to wonder what kind of man could have told such tales.

MacDonald's life was a remarkable pilgrimage and each stage of it, here carefully set down, has its own fascination. There was the happiness of the Huntly childhood (Huntly, once known as "The Raws of Strathbogie": could there be a more fitting name for the birthplace of one who wrote such haunting fairy tales?). There was the brief and unhappy pastorate with the deacons of Arundel, sniffing heresy, seeking to starve their young minister into orthodoxy by reducing his stipend. There were the long wilderness years as MacDonald, with his growing family, sought to establish himself as a writer. There was the widening circle of friends, both humble and famous, who, drawn to him by his rich humanity, came to see that here was one who walked with God. There are the tragic scenes as MacDonald [**end of page 37**] watches those dearest to him die young (He writes to his father, "We must weep often in this world but there are very different kinds of tears."). The end of the pilgrimage is at St. George's Wood (Mrs. Triggs' last chapter is the more moving for its economy and restraint). What a pity that St. George's Wood is now no longer a maternity unit ("Where did you come from, baby dear?") but a block of exclusive apartments for the bourgeoisie of

Haslemere.

This is a splendid and necessary volume. However, Mrs. Triggs has not been able to consult the primary sources (others, we gather, are quarrying the mountains of MacDonald material at Yale). She has to rely on Greville though, as we have long suspected and, since the original papers have now surfaced, we now know, Greville is not wholly reliable. Where Greville quotes his father's correspondence he is not above the occasional piece of pious sub-editing. On page 70 Mrs. Triggs gives us an extract from a letter MacDonald wrote to his father. According to Greville—and it is his text quoted—MacDonald tells his father that he had “visited Mr. Maurice and Lady Byron.” What MacDonald actually wrote was “visited Mr. Maurice and Lady Byron and Caleb Morris who gave me £5.” The omission is quite trivial but it is a pity that Greville felt he had to touch up the record in this way. (You would never know from Greville that the George MacDonald who appeared to be making such assiduous notes on long sermons in church was in fact writing to his wife.)

So we have here as excellent an account of MacDonald's life and as sensitive an introduction to his thought as the printed sources can yield. The definitive biography must await the labours of those who can spend long months at the Beinecke Library. **[end of page 38]**