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George MacDonald's "Missing" Year: A Sketch and a Re-evaluation

Bill Raeper

Much ink has been spilled over the few summer months in 1842 when the young George MacDonald is said to have spent some time "in cataloguing a neglected library" somewhere "in a certain castle or mansion in the far North" This episode has exercised the minds of critics and readers alike for the simple reasons that this period is strangely unaccounted for in Greville MacDonald's *George MacDonald and his Wife*; Greville MacDonald complained that he has "failed to trace" the whereabouts of this place. Furthermore, it appears that something significant happened to MacDonald during his time there—either a baptism of his imagination through coming into contact with this library, a disappointment in love—or even both. No one knows for sure. All that is sure is that this short period of MacDonald's life has come to be imbued with the colours of a detective romance. After all, how did MacDonald spend his time in the library, and where exactly was it? Why did he never talk of the summer months of 1842 to his family and friends—and was there, as has been suggested, a girl in the library who inflicted a lasting wound on his youthful heart? The only certainty is that the facts concerning this period will probably never come to light. All that remains is surmise and conjecture. But what exactly is the evidence? Where was this 'castle or mansion' likely to have been—and can any informed guesses be made as to what happened there?

It was a normal occurrence of students at King's College, Aberdeen, either to work on the land or to take a tutoring job during the long summer vacation after the university session had ended. The session, which lasted from November to March, was purposefully short so that students had time to earn money in order to be able to pay their way through their studies. As Greville MacDonald has pointed out in his **[end of page 3]** biography of his father, the MacDonald family were in desperate financial straits in 1842. The "hungry forties" were bad times for everyone trying to make a living out of the land, and, at The Farm in Huntly where MacDonald's father and uncle lived, the family were hard pressed to pay off the debts incurred by their wayward brother Charles who had fled to New York some years before,

leaving his brothers to settle his accounts. These circumstances probably forced George MacDonald to abandon his studies for a session and take some form of employment. Greville MacDonald outlined this situation in *George MacDonald and his Wife* and, while he was researching this book, wrote in a letter to his cousin and brother-in-law Edward Troup in 1922:

Many thanks for your sending me on the result of Bob's [Troup] investigations. It is very good of him. The particulars of our great Uncle Charles' delinquencies are interesting enough though of course will not figure as such in the Biography— They explain clearly enough, as you say, that father had to set to work in '42-'43. It is tragical to think that, once at least according to a letter of Uncle John's, grandfather was in need of a very few shillings.²

That MacDonald set to work is hardly in doubt, but where? Greville MacDonald, who was painstaking in his reconstruction of his father's life, was at a loss:

It is curious that I can find no record of how the summer months of 1842 were spent . . . I have been at considerable pains, both in correspondence and in travelling, to ascertain where this library is situated; for its importance in my father's education cannot be questioned.³

It is also curious that were it not for the existence of Robert Troup's notes on MacDonald's life, this incident would have gone completely unrecorded. It was Troup who wrote in shaky pencil that MacDonald "spent a year in a nobleman's mansion in the far north of Scotland perhaps doing tutorial work but chiefly I think, in arranging and cataloguing the library." It was only from these same notes that Greville MacDonald discovered the existence of the library at all.

Troup was from Rhynie, a small town close to Huntly, and he entered [4]King's College a couple of years behind MacDonald. The two men soon became friends. They attended Blackfriars Congregational Church together and, in his final session, Troup shared rooms with MacDonald's younger brother John. Later both Troup and MacDonald were students at Highbury Theological College in London, before Troup returned to Huntly where he became pastor of the Missioner Kirk (the church the MacDonald family attended). He married MacDonald's cousin Margaret in 1855, a cousin who was more of a sister as she and MacDonald had been raised in the same house together, and much later Troup's son Edward married MacDonald's youngest

daughter Winifred in Bordighera, Italy, in 1897. Troup was well placed, therefore, to know what MacDonald was doing in the summer of 1842, though he did not go into detail.

Greville MacDonald's patient researches led him to believe that:

... I have a strong suspicion that it was Thurso Castle It has a fine library, and its owner in 1842 was Sir George Sinclair, son of the first baronet. Sir John, the first President of the Board of Agriculture, a great linguist and collector of German literature, which fact tallies with the account of the library in *The Portent*. He died in 1835. The fact that my grandfather had some sort of intimacy with him is suggested by the use of his name on an advertisement as recommending the potato-flour or "farina" manufactured by the MacDonald brothers at Huntly.⁴

Forty years later Glenn Sadler, in his unpublished thesis on MacDonald's poetry, *The Cosmic Vision*, attempted to unearth some traces of MacDonald at Thurso Castle. He discovered that Sir George Sinclair had in fact studied at Gottingen in Germany, but the castle as such had been demolished and the library disposed-of long before. Any memory of MacDonald that there could have been had long since vanished.

Yet what evidence exists, circumstantial though it may be, still points to Thurso as being the likely place for MacDonald's sojourn in 1842. Thurso is in the far north, it *did* possess a library, and contemporary prints of the castle show it to be a half-castle, half-house, a recurring image in

MacDonald's writings, as in his novel *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, for example: [5]

There a broad, low rock seemed to grow out of it, and upon the rock stood the lordliest house my childish eyes had ever beheld. Take situation and all, and I have scarcely yet beheld one equal to it. Half-castle, half old English country seat, it covered the rock with a huge square of building, from various parts of which rose towers, mostly squares also, of different heights. I stood for one brief moment entranced with awful delight. A building which has grown for ages, the outcome of the life of powerful generations, has about it a majesty which, in certain moods, is overpowering.⁵

As has been stated, it was fairly standard practice for a university student to do some tutoring work and, interestingly enough, MacDonald was not the only tutor in his family. His younger brother, the scholarly and melancholy John, took the year 1848 out of his studies to go and teach at a big house

in the North-west of Scotland. That both brothers missed a session is clear from the university lists and probably there was pressure on both of them to provide their own finances for study. MacDonald made only one mention of John's time as a tutor; it was in a letter to his own wife, Louisa MacDonald, in 1884:

Till Troup reminded me, I had forgotten altogether that John was at some time at Eribol as tutor. James [MacDonald's cousin] thought I was there before him and *that it was there I got my hatred for Calvinism*.⁶

This is an interesting remark and it could mean many things. Unfortunately all it serves to *prove* is that MacDonald was not a tutor at Eribol.

MacDonald's dismissive tone might even suggest that his own period as a tutor was hardly worth remembering, though MacDonald critics, beginning with Greville MacDonald, have been convinced that MacDonald experienced some important imaginative awakening in the library—and certainly, images of libraries haunt MacDonald's work. It is the library described in *The Portent* that is often thought to come closest to the actual library that MacDonald catalogued during that summer of 1842:

Now I was in my element . . . I found a perfect set of our poets—perfect according to the notion of the editor and the issue of the publisher, although it omitted both Chaucer and George Herbert. I began to nibble at that portion of the collection which belonged to the sixteenth century; but with little success. I found nothing, to my idea, but love-poems without any love in them, and so I soon became weary. But I found in the library what I liked far **[6]** better—many romances of a very marvellous sort, and plentiful interruption they gave to the formation of the catalogue.⁷

Yet—was the library empty—or did the house contain a girl who flirted with MacDonald and then ditched him? For it does appear that whenever there is a library in MacDonald's writing, it comes with a woman attached. There is, however, no evidence for the existence of such a woman outside of MacDonald's own texts and, perversely, MacDonald's silence on the subject has come to be seen almost as proof that he did suffer a disappointment in love during that summer, rather than that nothing of importance happened to him at all.

It was Robert Lee Wolff in what is still the only extended treatment of MacDonald's works, *The Golden Key*, who removed the woman in the

library from the stage of the novel and placed her in the arena of life:

And—no reader of his books can doubt it—he fell in love, with a girl somewhat older than he, a member of the family that owned the castle and the library. She led him on a certain distance, and then rejected him because she felt him to be of an inferior social class. Again and again in his writing we shall find George MacDonald recurring with pain to these critical events of the mysterious summer of 1842, giving a different turn to each of his fictional accounts of the affair, striving to exorcise his own anguish and humiliation. No wonder his son could find no record of the summer: the fiction provides all that remains.⁸

There are, however, severe problems with Wolff's approach to this question, though, as David Robb has pointed out, it is the persistence of these images in MacDonald's fiction that give credence to Wolff's theory that the unhappy love affair actually happened. It is risky at the best of times to read fiction as autobiography, and, in this instance, there is not a single shred of external evidence to support the assertions that Wolff gleaned from the text. MacDonald is silent on an early disappointment in love, and that is that. But does this mean that such a thing never happened, or only that MacDonald was too deeply afflicted by this experience ever to talk about it?

MacDonald's early love (if he had one) was surely his cousin Helen MacKay, to whom he was deeply attached and to whom he wrote much poetry. Though Greville MacDonald is discreet about this romance, Louisa MacDonald's jealousy of Helen, and the two women's argument the night of [7] their visit to Arundel before MacDonald was installed as pastor at the Congregational Church there, suggests that there had been more than just cousinly affection between them. Furthermore, there are often traces of cousinly love in MacDonald's novels, as in the romance between Richard Lestranger and Barbara Wylder in *There and Back*. It would not be too hard to determine vestiges of Helen MacKay littered in MacDonald's texts, if a critic set doggedly to it.

The woman in the library, however, is a different matter.

By way of an aside, it is interesting to set MacDonald in the context of his family for a moment. For if MacDonald's youthful disappointment in love can never actually be proved, it is the case that both MacDonald's brothers suffered disappointments and (it could be argued) paid a dire penalty for it. First of all MacDonald's younger brother Alec, who was living in Manchester, became infatuated with Hannah Robertson, the daughter of

a Manchester surgeon. She refused his affections and after this rejection his health took a downward turn. Alec began bloodspitting, tuberculosis took a hold of his lungs, and he died in 1853. It might not be too simple to say that he died of a broken heart. Then John, dissatisfied with his lot as a schoolmaster, set out for Russia where he too fell in love. He was trapped by the outbreak of the Crimean War, barely escaped with his life, and returned home—alone. He too succumbed to tuberculosis and died in 1858. It appears that the MacDonalds had a profound capacity for destructive melancholy. The stories of Alec's and John's disappointments are both well known, and John's tales of adventure even found their way into the narrative of Ian MacRuadh in *What's Mine's Mine*.⁹ Yet it is not necessary to suppose that MacDonald was like his brothers in fact as well as feeling. Psychological creation and history need not coincide.

MacDonald's novels are a mixture of autobiography and fantasy—and usually it is possible to distinguish between the two. *Alec Forbes of Howglen* and *Robert Falconer* contain many characters and incidents from MacDonald's own boyhood, and this was recognised (and sometimes criticised) by MacDonald's family and the community in Huntly. The boyhood adventures [8] of Robert Falconer are, however, rather removed from the antics of Donal Grant and Lady Arctura in *Donal Grant*, a novel which appears to be almost purely fantasy. Equally, Mary St. John in *Robert Falconer* is the stuff of fable or fairy tale and oddly out of place in a novel peopled with characters from the Huntly of the 1830s. This jarring juxtaposition may result from the fact that MacDonald's writing represents a psychological continuum with himself (for he wrote very fast and uncritically) and so his texts contain evidence of his own inner psychic processes as well as his outer personal history. Seen in this light, MacDonald's characters are not only descriptions of people he once knew, but projections of his psyche. It is no accident that the title of the first published work was *Within and Without*. A castle, then, need not be a "real" castle which MacDonald visited, but a castle of the soul, an extension of the human personality, as in *Castle Warlock*. MacDonald wrote of his hero Cosmo in this book:

The love of his soul for Castle Warlock was like the love of the Psalmist for Jerusalem: when he looked on a stone of its walls, it was dear to him—the house was almost a part of himself—an extension of his own body, as much his as the shell of a snail is his.¹⁰

Thus it could be argued that the lady in the library is no more than a personal fantasy (albeit a recurring one) rather than a creature of flesh and blood. While it is true to say that many of the symbols MacDonald employed were rooted in fact (the flood, for example, referring to the Moray Floods of 1829, the castle, and the horse, to name but three), MacDonald's use of the female figure is complex and hard to unravel. It is true too that these many symbols function in novels that cannot be read in an "ordinary" way. MacDonald's plots are fantastic—almost irritations—and his characters are largely (with one or two notable exceptions) unbelievable. In effect, MacDonald's novels are *fantasies* in realistic form, three-volume fairy tales which betray the tenor of their author's imagination and which were written to spread his message and to make money to support his very large family. The strength of the books lies in their use of the archetypal symbols embedded in the text—symbols that refer to one another and charge one another—not just within a single text, but within all of MacDonald's texts.

More than [9] many writers, MacDonald's output is very much a holistic oeuvre. Robert Lee Wolff in *The Golden Key* complained that after 1868 there was no progress in MacDonald's thinking, that MacDonald was not so much trying to draw a straight line as to spin a web. The centre of this web, where MacDonald's symbols find a consummation and a convergence, is *Lilith*. This book was written towards the end of MacDonald's life, in 1895, and is possibly his greatest work.

MacDonald's characters have often been chastised as cardboard figures of melodrama or creatures of fairy tale. To see them as archetypal psychic fragments who yield to a Jungian analysis is perhaps a more helpful way of looking at them. In MacDonald's writing (with the vigorous exceptions of Florimel in *Malcolm* and Barbara Wylder in *There and Back*) his female characters are more polarised aspects of Woman than solid characters in their own right. They are, for the most part, certainly not based on people whom MacDonald actually knew. With this in mind, it becomes clear that MacDonald's "temptresses" (Euphra Cameron in *David Elginbrod*, Clara Coningham in *Wilfrid Cumbermede* and Lady Lufa in *Home Again* to name but three, and there are many more) are always set in opposition to saintly "natural" women (Margaret Elginbrod, Mary Osborne and Molly in the same three novels). The temptress and the saint thus balance one another and such projections do conform to well-laid-down Jungian patterns. If this is the case then the flirt in the library may well be no more than an aspect of an ongoing fantasy and the library itself, a place of exploration, mystery and

knowledge, no more than a dream (after all, in *Lilith* the library really does become a dream). In addition, with modern psychoanalytic criticism much to the fore, stressing the link between textuality and sexuality, finding a woman in a library may be an obvious psychological and literary motif and nothing more. In any case, it might be argued that a real woman could not have appeared in MacDonald's texts as a shifting fantasy, but would have left some visible contours to her character, ripples that would have left more detectable traces in the writings. So, once more, only conjecture remains.¹¹

Yet there is another question that still has to be asked. Was there in [10] fact a betraying woman in MacDonald's life who did let him down and abandon him, that we already know about? The answer, surprisingly, is yes.

Far-fetched as it might seem, the woman who clearly did abandon MacDonald was none other than his mother who died when he was aged only eight. Robert Lee Wolff built much of his thesis on MacDonald's feeling of rejection due to his mother's hasty weaning of him, but there is more than that to be said about MacDonald's early loss. It is often the case that two things happen (to put matters simply) when a child loses a parent at an early age. Firstly the child feels abandoned and can project its own feelings of loss onto the parent image, resulting in the creation of a malignant fiction. The mother becomes a monster in the child's imagination because the child subconsciously believes that the mother has abandoned it. These feelings, of course, conflict with the memories of the real parent so a fragmentation takes place. And secondly the child feels guilty that it is resentful toward its dead parent.

This thesis becomes more convincing when a reading of MacDonald's texts shows not only a fragmentation of the female image into temptresses and saints, but a host of malignant and unnatural mothers, embittered and corrupting, who want only to manipulate their children. Lady Malice in *Mary Marston*, Mrs Cathcart in *Adela Cathcart* and, most powerfully, Lady Cairnedge in *The Flight of the Shadow* are only three of such women in MacDonald's novels. He set about resolving this particular conflict regarding the mother image in *Lilith* where, intriguingly enough, the figure of the temptress and the mother are combined.¹² It is as though the flirt in the library and the unnatural mother have been as two sides of the same coin all along. In *Lilith* Lilith finally does lie down in the House of Rest to sleep the sleep of the Blessed, accompanied by a whole race of orphan children who snuggle up to the corpses of dead women whom they adopt as their mothers. At the end of the book it seems that Lilith is as much

Vane's (the hero's) mother as Lona's (Vane's bride and Lilith's daughter). Finally, on the ascent to Paradise close to the end of the book and at the very end of MacDonald's career as a writer, [11] Vane is able to shout, "I see my mother!" This triumphant cry seems to reach back into MacDonald's earliest years; and may help to some extent to explain his macabre preoccupation with death and corpses for all of his life.

To assert that the flirt in the library of Thurso Castle in 1842 was in fact MacDonald's mother may be unacceptable to many people; but a close reading of the function of feminine imagery in MacDonald's texts in comparison with events in his life does not rule out this conclusion. At any rate a closer examination of MacDonald's writings is both timely and necessary. To accept conjecture as fact without examining the evidence is foolhardy, while, on the other hand, to close ranks to any form of critical inquiry is merely narrow-minded. It has to be said that criticism of MacDonald's writings has been fitful and often slight. There are still many books to be written about him and theses to be researched on him. As yet the surface has barely been scratched.

Endnotes

1. *George MacDonald and his Wife*: Greville MacDonald (Allen & Unwin, London 1924) p.72.
2. Greville MacDonald to Edward Troup, Wildwood, Haslemere, December 6th 1922. This letter is in the possession of the MacDonald family.
3. *GMAHW* f.n. p.73.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Wilfrid Cumbermede* Vol.1 p.113 (Hurst & Blackett, London 1872).
6. George MacDonald to Louisa MacDonald, August 21 1884 (ALS Yale).
7. *The Portent* p.80 (Smith Elder, London 1864).
8. *The Golden Key*. Robert Lee Wolff (Yale University Press, 1961) pp. 16
9. Ian is the Gaelic form of John.
10. *Castle Warlock* Vol.III p.135 (Sampson Low, London 1882). [12]
11. It should be pointed out that, by and large, MacDonald is very good at telling us the flesh and blood bases for his fictions. It is well attested that Mrs Falconer in *Robert Falconer* is based on MacDonald's own grandmother, that David Elginbrod in the novel of the same name is an idealisation of MacDonald's father and that Marion Clare and Lady Bernard in *The Vicar's Daughter* are founded squarely on Octavia Hill and Lady Byron.
12. That MacDonald had a profound fear of being abandoned cannot be doubted. Towards the end of his life in Bordighera he would cling to Louisa crying, "I know

you are all going away from me, and I'm going to be left in a strange house." Much more than there is space for here can be written on this particular subject. **[13]**