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## The MacDonald Family and *Pilgrim's Progress*

Rachel Johnson

To any reader of the available biographies of George MacDonald, it must soon become obvious that the production of the *Pilgrim's Progress* was more than just a passing influence on the corporate life of the MacDonald family. If this were not enough to merit interest, the entry for MacDonald in the *Dictionary of National Biography* supplement, might create a desire to look at it further. Having noted that George MacDonald married Louisa Powell in 1851, it continues:

“She adapted for stage presentation a series of scenes from the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ in which her husband and children took part, and the experiment led the way for later revival of others, of old miracle plays.”<sup>1</sup>

This may seem rather an exaggerated, unsupported claim, but it does open yet another facet of interest in the MacDonalds. On the same note, Joseph Johnson, an early biographer, mentions a comment by a Mr. Japp, who refers to the performance of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, that seemed like a revival of old miracle plays.

Initial problems of licensing the play were overcome in an unspecified manner. Greville notes:

“In the first place the Lord Chamberlain refused to license a religious play; yet, being above the law, my mother always found means for circumventing it!”<sup>2</sup>

He reveals no more.

The play was performed between the years 1877 and 1889, the schedule varying in intensity. There were years when the amount of travelling involved, and the number of performances given, must have been a **[end of page 1]** gruelling exercise in endurance, especially as many members of the family were often ill, and the others not of the most robust physical constitution.

Added to the acting, George MacDonald himself sometimes gave lectures, it being sensible to tie the lecturing itinerary in with the performance of *Pilgrim's Progress*. On occasion, as can be seen from letters he wrote,<sup>4</sup> **[Note: endnote 3 missing in original]** MacDonald picked up theatrical engagements while on a lecturing tour. The winter months in Italy must have

been a welcome relief, particularly during the middle years and after the Scottish tour in 1885.

As is well documented elsewhere, George MacDonald and his family had close friendships and connections with many prominent figures of the time. Among their letters, books and other recorded communications, one frequently comes upon references to the *Pilgrim's Progress*. Even as late as 1945, Osbert Sitwell, in making reference to his grandmother's view of theatricals, recorded her making an exception by allowing *Pilgrim's Progress* to be played on the occasion of his father's coming of age in 1881.<sup>5</sup>

Augustus Hare in "The Story of My Life" mentions one of the earlier performances in 1877. He comments that "Christiana (the eldest daughter) was the only one who acted well." He did however concede that "the whole effect was touching, and the audience cried roost sympathetically as Christiana embraced her children to go over the river." This performance was given at Lady Ducie's, and would probably have been arranged with the help of Octavia Hill, in connection with whose work numerous performances were given.

In January 1880, Lilia, in a letter to Jane Cobden, gives an insight into the attitudes of those to whom the family played. She expressed [2] herself in such a manner as to indicate the accepted, even unquestioned climate into which the players came. She wrote "we had a much better audience than hoped for this afternoon . . . People were wise enough to think this different from a secular affair." In this atmosphere it is not surprising that the views, and reviews of individuals varied from the euphoric to the disparaging. The former can be seen in the enthusiasm of Lewis Carroll, who held the family up as examples of perfect clarity in diction, the latter in an article by Laura Ragg, who wrote: "the team seemed to me, wholly inadequate to a very difficult task . . . and I felt Bunyan's great allegory had been travested rather than popularized."<sup>6</sup> Written by one who early regarded herself as "a sophisticated playgoer," this review takes no account of the reception of the *Pilgrim's Progress* by other equally sophisticated members of audiences, among whom were numbered Princess Louise and Kate Terry.

Other letters, particularly those written by Lilia and Grace, make clear how the involvement of friends was important to the venture, be it in the use of rooms,<sup>7</sup> the distribution of publicity, or in personal invitation. Another letter of Lilia's to Jane Cobden, in January 1879, cites an instance of this: She asks: "I do not know if you happened to hear of the way we did it before. Ladies bought so many tickets to give away to persons they know

...” This letter is also the first confirming an engagement for *Pilgrim’s Progress* that was given at Woodford. Later in the same year, in April, her tentative apprehension as to whether there would be more interest, is to prove unfounded, as a letter from Grace to Edward Troup, in July, gives a string of venues. In May 1881, as recognition grew, Lilia wrote to Jane Cobden from Bordighera. “We are working away at some of the first part of *Pilgrim’s [3]* Progress to play in the provinces this autumn. Many places are asking for us.”

Though a sense of mission pervaded the production, and the work was seen as one done to the audience’s higher good, this did not mean that the organisation was lax. The company was able to provide those interested in hosting productions with a clear set of needs. This can be seen in letters from the family, both to each other and to friends. An example is found in a letter from Irene (the 4th daughter) to Edith Denman, who had made enquiry on behalf of a friend. It read:

“Our charge for performing a short piece In a drawing room or garden would be 25 guineas. We can bring our own stage with us where it is required but should want the room the day before to put it up in.”

A performance of Mrs. Gurney’s was also carefully planned, as is recorded in a letter from Lilia to her mother: “the boys can begin to put up the stage before 11 on Thurs. and the rehearsal could be at 5 o’clock.” This precision is followed by other practical arrangements for the players.

Throughout the family’s correspondence there were allusions as to how the production was to be mounted. Although George MacDonald became known as the player of “Greatheart,” it was Ronald, his second son, who first took the part. MacDonald himself first played it at Grosvenor House on June 8th 1877, “on which occasion,” Lady Troup (MacDonald’s daughter Winifred) records, “Princess Louise was present.” Lilia records that in the initial performances her mother took three different parts. Later on, names of family friends often cropped up in the cast, to cover for illness, injury or absence. Kingsbury Jameson, who married Grace, helped when Ronald was unable to take his part. E. R. Hughes (Ted Hughes, nephew of the artist Arthur Hughes) played Mr. Brisk when he was [4] with the family. He became engaged to Mary Josephine, MacDonald’s second daughter, in 1873, though she contracted lung disease soon afterwards and died in April 1878 in Porto Fino.

On the occasion of Grace’s illness when the *Progress* was on tour, Octavia Hill was called upon to play her part, that of Piety, to a Harrogate

audience.

During the course of their lives, the MacDonald family harboured a number of homeless people, among whom were Honey and Joan Desaint and their mother. They too appeared in later performances, as Christiana's sons. By this time other members of the family had grown out of the parts. Willie and Ernest Nicholls were called upon to play the two smallest boys, and appear in one of the six photographs found interleaved with the copy of the play housed in the Beineke library, Tale.

In her letter to Edith Denman, Irene mentioned that the duration of the *Pilgrim's Progress* was two hours and fifty minutes. This ties in with the times given on a printed notice for a performance at Langham hall in 1879. Lilia also, made reference to posters displayed in Matlock to advertise the performance when writing to her mother in October 1880. Having inspected them the day before, she was unhappy with changes made, complaining that: "The big posters are not at all nice, they changed the type of Pilgrim's since we saw it yesterday." Irene wrote to her mother in October 1881 using the back of a notice of the performance in Scarborough. This is very similar to the one produced for the Langham Hall performances.

Ronald described himself as a "stage carpenter and performer in ordinary to Mrs. George MacDonald, Dramatic stage-manager, prompter, pianist, dresser, property man etc. in extra-ordinary to everyone,"<sup>8</sup> but in fact the company managed with very few "props." The preface to the [5] script notes "Except in the second scene, where a wicket gate and paling were needed, no scenery was used: the stage was hung with curtains of appropriate colour and design to each scene." Several references are made to these curtains, a particularly interesting one being that in a letter to Louisa from Ellen Gurney, niece of Mrs. Russell Gurney. After visiting the family at Boscome, a place to which they had moved in an effort to bring some improvement to the health of both Mary and her father. She wrote: "I seem to see you toiling away at the furnishings of Greatheart and Feeblemind, and causing great bulrushes and irises to blossom upon your curtains." Greville too, in his biography, mentioned these curtains, some in appliqué design of birds and flowers, "made," he wrote, "by mother and her daughters."<sup>9</sup> The flowers on these curtains were on occasion supplemented by real flowers. In 1885, Greville recounts, Miss Godwin, daughter of the Bishop, provided a dogcart full of flowers for the lord of Beulah. This was for the Carlisle performance in Sept. 1881, and is attested in a review of the play printed in *The Carlisle Journal* for Sept. 23rd.

The other method used on the curtains was to embroider the outline of trees, flowers, etc. and fill them in with paint. This was no doubt executed more quickly and would enable more members of the family to participate in their preparation. The photographs in the Beineke give a clear idea of costumes worn by the actors. The ladies were generally in Puritan-style dress, the men in dress comparable to the period, according to their character. Thus, Mr. Brisk wore cavalier costume and so on. The exceptions were Greatheart, and the heavenly messengers. The former appeared as a Crusader in tabard and chain mail. The chain mail consisted of a black suit of fine knitted material, probably wool, [6] including helmet and gauntlets, covered in large metal sequins. These caught the light as the actor moved about the stage. The original tabard was made of white serge, bordered in red, with a red cross appliquéd onto the breast. This was later replaced by a big heart when the original tabard was used for a pall at the funeral of Maurice, who died of pneumonia at Porto Fino, aged 14.

The simplicity of the production added to the overall effect it had on the audience. Joseph Johnson wrote:

“. . . yet all who came and saw and heard the rendering of the old story, with the simple Puritan costumes and plain stage accessories, went away feeling that no performance could be more unpretentious and reverential. Everything was subordinate to the real meaning of Bunyan's dream.”<sup>10</sup>

There are some photographs (here) in the family album which show players in their parts. They indicate how some of the characters not already mentioned were cast. Louisa MacDonald is shown as Mistress Much-Afraid, Ronald as Feeble-mind, Irene appears as Charity and as the Shepherd's Boy, Winifred as Piety, Grace as Mercy and Alice Gray as Prudence.

This brief indication alone shows the interchange which tended to happen amongst players of what could be regarded as the minor parts. There is nothing to show who played Mr. Honest, though George MacDonald played both Interpreter and Evangelist, both of which could be seen to be as much in character as Greatheart.

It would appear that rehearsals for the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and other plays, were so much part of the general activity of family life that very little special mention is given. In Lilia's letter relating to the performance hosted by Mrs. Gurney, specific reference is made to time set aside for rehearsal; also, writing from Porto Fino, she referred to rehearsals of the *Pilgrim's Progress* as the family hoped for more [7] engagements. This reference is a

poignant one as it comes a year after the death of Mary and within a month of the death of Maurice, both losses being keenly felt by the family.

Though the last recorded public performance (of *Pilgrim's Progress*) was in 1889, attempts were made to put it on at Casa Coraggio later, though the loss of Lilia, the most naturally talented actress in 1891, left too large a gap to ensure its success. The curtains used for so long as scenery were hung in the great room (at Casa Coraggio).

Despite the involvement of the whole family in the venture, Greville, the eldest son, had many reservations and misgivings about his family becoming a troupe of peripatetic actors. He was about to embark on his medical career and therefore could never have been involved "from the inside" as the others were. In his biography of his parents he confesses "to some anguish that mother and sisters should have to do these things, and that brothers should have their education interrupted."<sup>12</sup> **[Note: endnote 11 missing in original]**

Though he could accept the performances for charity, he could not accept them for profit, despite his awareness of the benefits to be had by his family of being able to spend the winter months in Italy. Neither could he enter into his mother's, and later on, his father's sense of mission that became such a driving force in the continuing of the production. His main objection was his embarrassment on behalf of his family. With the exception of Lilia, they were, he felt, simply not good enough actors, they could not "make their own persons vanish in their art,"<sup>13</sup> as she could. Though George MacDonald himself felt some sympathy with Greville's position, he accepted Louisa's certainty that this was work given her to do, by God, for the well-being of her ailing family.

Apart from the principle of public acting for profit, Greville felt **[8** a personal loss in that "the old peace and rest in the house was . . . made impossible by the exigencies of the drama."<sup>14</sup> As a doctor, he feared the toll such work would take upon his family's health, "work for which, he felt, not one of the company was physically fit,"<sup>15</sup> though he did concede "the change of occupation may have been good for my father," but qualifies it by giving us the picture of George MacDonald correcting proofs as he waited the call for Greatheart.<sup>16</sup>

Greville does however take pains to say, "I dare not let any criticism of my own . . . detract from the truth that my mother's interpretation of the *Pilgrim's Progress* created a profound impression upon everyone susceptible to such spiritual art. Dean Stanley was high in praise of its sanctity, Burne-

Jones of its beauty.”<sup>17</sup>

The sense of mission, of work given by God, not only pervaded the lives of, firstly Louisa, who, (as mentioned above) saw the play as the pathway by which her family found health, but also George, whose part was seen by friends as a vocation in life, or, in Greville’s words “part of my father’s mission in the world.”<sup>18</sup> Many of his closest friends addressed him as Greatheart. Greville again notes “Wherever the family appeared, among rich or poor, in public hall or private house, the *Pilgrim’s Progress* awakened deep enthusiasm and spiritual uplifting . . . .”<sup>19</sup>

This communication of spiritual benefit grew in significance as the family journeyed through their own lives. Not only was their yearly migration to Italy seen as a concrete expression of the life of the pilgrims, as was their continued trekking round the country with the play itself, but the experiences had by Christiana, her sons and Mercy had their counterparts in their own lives. The deep way in which the *Pilgrim’s Progress* was with them is revealed in their letters, to one another and to friends, both in the minor and major events in life. [9] Lilia, in writing to her mother after a visit to Mrs. Gurney, concludes: “It was getting to the House Beautiful to see her again.” (April 23rd 1877) and in a letter to Jane Cobden from Porto Fino in 1879, she referred to her brother Maurice as “our lovely door-porter,” one of his parts latterly being the “Keeper of the Gate.” Ellen Gurney writes to Louisa after her visit to Boscombe, addressing her as “Sweet Pilgrim Mother” (1877).

One incident which reveals the close identification of the family with their parts, comes in a letter from Grace to Lilia (Aug. 6th 1881). She suggests a “splendid idea for cousin Elizabeth’s wedding present . . . photos of all the new Pilgrims, the same size and each alone.” She continues by suggesting how this might be accomplished. It is evident, from the thought and from her expression of it, that to present her cousin with such photographs was more than to give her family portraits, but was a way in which the family could give something of themselves to mark such an occasion.

After the death of Mary in April 1878, the performance schedule underwent a lull, to return with renewed vigour in 1879, with which even the death of Maurice did not interfere. The loss served to intensify both their own sense of daily pilgrimage, and the significance of the performances they gave. A letter from Lilia to Jane Cobden in April 1879 underlines their awareness of the situation and anticipates surprise on the part of their friends (April 1st 1879). She explains:



“You will wonder, perhaps, as we did at first, how we can go through it so soon after parting with our Maurice— . . . but we thought we ought to try and are quite glad we did so, it has all come back to us with such force and truthfulness and fresh light as has made the rehearsing of it quite a help on along the difficult path of the real daily pilgrimage.”<sup>20</sup>

George MacDonald himself had been immersed in the *Pilgrim’s Progress* [10] from an early age,<sup>21</sup> and it is clear that the picture of life as a journey towards the Celestial City was ever present with him. Other members of the family constantly referred to it in letters to friends and relatives as if measuring incidents in their lives against it by way of clarification. “Irene,” Lilia wrote to Edward Troup, “goes sketching, straps on her back for all the world like Christiana’s bundle.” This kind of referral is frequent, and it was a habit caught by friends as well. Cowper-Temple wrote in July 1877 on the occasion of Mary’s illness: “A brother Pilgrim is allowed to send from the family coffer a little offering towards the extra expenses of this time of illness which he hopes will be accepted for ‘Love’s sake.’”

Again, Mrs. Russell Gurney wrote: “How blessed has been your discoursing to me, beloved Greatheart, during the last three weeks” (Feb. 15th 1893). This was on reading MacDonald’s sermon on God’s family in “The Hope of the Gospel.” In a later letter she addressed George and Louisa as “Blessed Brother Greatheart and Sister Mother Bird of God” (July 19th 1894) and concludes another “the voice of the Greatheart in sympathy and Hope does indeed cheer the poor Pilgrim Emilia” (Dec. 25th 1893).

After her visit to Boscombe already mentioned, Ellen Gurney wrote a letter which summed up the lives of the family and their view of their many friendships. She finishes: “Farewell, sweet sweet fellow pilgrims and may we meet again a little further on our journey” (May 6th 1877). One might add “either on this, or the other side of the river.”

#### Endnotes

1. Joseph Johnson. George MacDonald, p.51.
2. Greville MacDonald. *George MacDonald and His Wife (GMD & W)* p.502. [11]
3. Data taken from the family notebook of Winifred Troup, as found in Muriel Button’s ‘Report on the Pilgrim’s Progress,’ p. 2.
4. M. H. p.11.
5. O. Sitwell. *Left Hand, Right Hand*. 1945.
6. M. H., p. 22 and 23 (article in “English,” vol. XI, Summer 1956. No. 62, pp. 59-

63.

7. Letter to Louisa from Lilia about accommodation for play at Mrs. Gurney's. April 23rd 1877.

8. Ronald's titles—M. H. p. 16.

9. GMD 6, W, p. 502.

10. J. Johnson, CMD p. 179.

11. GMD & W p. 502.

12. Ibid., p. 471.

13. Ibid., p. 471.

14. Ibid., p. 503.

15. Ibid., p. 505.

16. Ibid., p. 502.

17. Ibid., p. 504.

18. Ibid., p. 503.

19. Ibid., p. 502.

20. M. H. p. 20.

21. See W. Raeper. *George MacDonald*. pp. 33 and 106. **[12]**