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## Extract from a Lecture Given by Dr. David Robb at Huntly on Wednesday 26th September 1990

David Robb

**F**inally, I should like to turn to consider some of the possible literary influences upon him which we might find in previous Scottish writing. Several writers in particular, I think, need some comment but, before getting on to them, we should also remind ourselves of the less specific surely equally powerful impact on him of Scotland's oral tradition. It is not just that ballad-imitations seem to me to be among his most successful poems but that his perennial love of the supernatural can be traced as well to this origin as to any other. In *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood*, a story about and for children which is clearly, in part at least, autobiographical, he describes a group of children clustered round an adult tale-teller and being deliciously frightened out of their wits by the tale she tells. The invaluable George Gray also has a reminiscence of interest here, when he records that there was, in MacDonald's Huntly, a great belief in ghosts and that few young children would go out at night. There was also a belief in witchcraft still—though, fortunately, no witches were being burned. William Alexander, in his snappily entitled *Notes and Sketches illustrative of Northern Rural Life in the Eighteenth Century*, makes the same kind of point about the area in general. It is occasionally possible to catch glimpses of conceivable influence between some of the tales in MacDonald's writing and actual tales from the area. He also had a knowledge of the more familiar Scots ballads such as "Clerk Saunders" and "Tarn Lin," as **[end of page 5]** chapter-mottoes in *David Elginbrod* indicate.

The first of the established writers, however, to whom I wish to draw your attention, is Walter Scott. It is safe to mention him as an influence on MacDonald because he was an influence, one way or another, on most literary sensibilities of MacDonald's generation. There is perhaps only one major attempt by MacDonald to write something like a historical novel in the style of Scott, and that is the tale of the English Civil War which he published in 1876, *St. George and St. Michael*. (Though not one of his most important novels, it is really perfectly readable, as I recall.) More important, MacDonald was undoubtedly influenced by that crucial effect that Scott had had on the novel as a literary form: he had given it a new status—a respectability which was partly a matter of demonstrating how it could handle great—indeed, epic—themes and partly a matter of draining any hint of the

licentious from hugely successful works of fiction. Scott ennobled the novel, as it were, and this association of Scott with nobility (an association which the facts of Scott's last years could only have enhanced) can perhaps be felt in one of the few explicit references to Scott in MacDonald's novels which I can recall. In *David Elginbrod*, part of Hugh Sutherland's musings about the noble peasant whom he is befriending is "what a character David would have been for Sir Walter." More generally, MacDonald must have looked back at Scott's immense success with fictions about Scotland—a success which was both artistic and financial—as he embarked on the bold and desperate enterprise of writing Scottish fiction for himself. Scott, also, was one of MacDonald's topics when he gave lectures, as he did at various times in his life, to help eke out the family finances.

These comments do not suggest, however, a very specific influence— [6] nothing in comparison with the way writers like Novalis, and Spenser, can be seen helping to shape the unique qualities of MacDonald's writing. And to some extent the same can be said, I think, about the man who seems to us now to be the most quintessential of Scottish writers, Robert Burns. Which is not to say that MacDonald was unaware of Burns—far from it. Indeed, once again in that first novel, *David Elginbrod*, Burns is specifically mentioned by David himself as a poet he treasures—and as a man whose spiritual welfare was a major issue. For to MacDonald, as to many Victorians and to Scotsmen before and since, the moral nature of Burns himself was a matter of great interest. When David exclaims "Puir Robbie! puir Robbie! But, man, he was a gran' chield efter a'; an' I trust in God he's won hame by this!" he is underlining the Victorian concern with Burns the Sinner, and utilising this Victorian commonplace as an expression of the bold redemption theology which is one of the characteristic concerns of this, as well as of many other MacDonald novels. Like most of his time, MacDonald was fascinated, and perhaps puzzled, by Burns. Burns was clearly a great poet and there was a tendency to believe—and certainly MacDonald believed it with particular fervour—that poets and poetry are among the mouthpieces of God. They instinctively idealised the poetic act. How to square this with the only too well known facts about Burns's conduct? MacDonald's approach was to winnow out the wheat from the chaff. Here is what he says, in his role as narrator, about Burns as reading matter for a young Scots poet—in this case Donal Grant when he first appears in *Sir Gibbie*:

He managed to get the loan of a copy of Burns—better meat for a strong spirit than the poetry of Byron or even Scott. An innate cleanliness of soul rendered the occasional coarseness to him harmless, and the mighty torrent of the man's life, broken

by occasional pools reflecting the stars; its headlong hatred of hypocrisy and false religion; its [7] generosity, and struggling conscientiousness; its failures and its repentances, roused much in the heart of Donal.

And also, clearly, in the heart of George MacDonald. This is a very fine tribute to Burns, and it is one which makes less of a distinction between the life and the work than one might have expected. MacDonald is clearly responding to the degree to which the life and the work come together—responding to the fact that, in the case of Burns, life and work are intermingled to a particularly marked degree. That is just the kind of poet Burns is. The passion which we can detect in this brief homily on Burns was no passing whim of the moment; William Raeper points out that Burns was by far MacDonald's favourite lecture topic on his American tour of the 1870s. So while it is hard, I think, to delineate many particular literary influences from works by Burns leading to work by MacDonald, (one likely exception is the impact of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" on *David Elginbrod* in particular) it seems to me likely that MacDonald was conscious of, and proud of, a kinship of outlook with Burns. Burns's church satires seem to be particularly close to MacDonald's awareness as he writes the words I have just, quoted, and he was responding, more generally, to the egalitarian spirit which pervades much of the earlier writer's work. Burns was clearly a role-model in the same rather generalised way that Scott was, but with the additions that two aspects of Burns's work may have particularly helped or encouraged MacDonald to develop as a writer: the outspoken ferocity of Burns's attacks on ecclesiastical opponents seem in accord with the outlook of the later writer who also clearly fancied himself as a bonny fechter in a righteous cause, and among Burns's many treatments of sexual love—treatments of all moods—a large number would have chimed with the idealising instincts of MacDonald. [9]

I have chided, very gently, MacDonald for his gullibility in the matter of the authenticity of MacPherson's *Ossian*. The really important thing to say about MacDonald and *Ossian*, however, is the sheer power which it seems to have had over him. William Raeper says that "it is hard to appreciate now the spell that Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels cast over the nineteenth century." I find it a good deal harder to appreciate the spell which MacPherson's *Ossian* cast over not only the nineteenth century, but the later decades of the 18th, as well. Those never-ending pages, cast in neither prose nor poetry but made of something in between, imagining a past or immense stylisation and never departing far from tones of sorrow and regret, seem now all too empty and wearisome. The over-riding impression is of a literature with little or no contact with the real world at all. (A

comparison with the sagas will swiftly show how a heroic past can be transmuted into literature.)

What did MacDonald find so appealing about *Ossian*? He found a heroic world, in which the deeds and attitudes of men and women take on a vast, epic significance. He found a poetic narrative which locates individuals, time and time again, in a wide landscape—a relationship to which his own fiction often tends. He found (and he was certainly not alone in this) an image of natural man—an image which portrays man as heroic, valiant, chivalrous, loving and emotional. More specifically, he found in Ossian himself (who appears as a character in his own poems, as it were) a figure who is both warrior and bard—not a bad embodiment of MacDonald’s own sense of himself. Furthermore, Ossian is the son of the matchless hero Fingal, and the image of a son of a supremely splendid father is one which struck chords in MacDonald both in respect of his sense of mankind’s relationship with God and also, more narrowly, in [9] respect of his own relationship with his own father. The fact, too, that Ossian is a presence, as a character, in his own narrative poems may we’ll have encouraged a similar tendency in MacDonald the novel-writer, whose strong personality not only suffuses the character of his writing but regularly steps forward as a commentating, “preaching” narrator. In addition to these general resemblances, it is possible to find, in several of the Ossianic works, more particular echoes of details which occur in MacDonald. There can be little doubt that MacPherson’s *Ossian* was one of the permanent influences which formed MacDonald’s literary imagination, and his whole outlook. The works in which he seems to be most completely conscious of *Ossian*, however, are (perhaps) *David Elginbrod* and the later novels which deal more specifically with the Highland past and present, namely *Malcolm* and *The Marquis of Lossie*.

Lastly, one comes to a Scottish writer with whom MacDonald seems to have had a particularly close kinship. Readers of his novels will know that MacDonald was powerfully attracted to the image of the largely self-taught Scottish lad of genius who makes his way in the world: many of his heroes, whether of peasant origin or the scions of down-at-heel noble families (MacDonald didn’t seem to think that there was much difference between these two categories), grow up in Scottish obscurity and yet attain to pre-eminence, thanks to their native intelligence and poetic sensitivity. Once again it is hard not to feel that such heroes are a projection of MacDonald’s sense of himself, to some extent at least. Once again, MacDonald is adopting a myth and moulding his sense of himself to its shape. (This is not intended as a criticism of MacDonald.) In particular, the poetic faculty of these heroes clearly ties with

how MacDonald saw himself. Where did MacDonald get this image from? The most obvious model would seem to be Burns, the Ploughman Poet. [10]

But there is another writer who fits the stereotype even better—a poet and novelist who really did have merely a few months of formal schooling in his whole life, and whose ability to read and write was largely self-taught. Furthermore, we know that he held a special place in MacDonald’s scheme of things. This was James Hogg, “The Ettrick Shepherd” (1770-1835), the author of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. That he held a special place in MacDonald’s estimation is indicated, above all, by the reference to him in *At the Back of the North Wind*, where he is coupled with Dante himself as giving us a vision of heaven. MacDonald quotes fourteen lines of Hogg’s poem “Kilmeny,” which he sees less as a fairytale poem than as a poem of religious vision. In some ways it seems extraordinary that this second-rank 19th-century writer could be at all associated with one of the greatest writers the world has ever produced, but Hogg had been among MacDonald’s favourite authors from an early age. Greville MacDonald mentions Hogg as being among those poets quoted by his father in a book of extracts copied for his cousin Helen MacKay while he was a student in Aberdeen, and the young Alec Forbes is described lying on the summertime grass, reading the *Arabian Nights* “and the Ettrick Shepherd’s stories.” I think that what MacDonald responded to in Hogg’s writing was its tendency to move away from, or beyond, the world of the everyday. The worlds of ballad, of folk-lore and of the fairytale mark much of what Hogg, steeped from birth in the oral tradition, wrote. “Kilmeny” is a hauntingly beautiful poem—though perhaps overlong—and its resonant sound and its ability to suggest the tug of a lovely land to which the earth-bound heroine yearns to return would obviously appeal to MacDonald. The lines he quotes describe a vision of heaven. Equally powerful, no doubt, would have been [11] his response to the final lines, describing Kilmeny’s second and final leave-taking of the mortal world:

It wasna her hame, and she couldna remain;  
She left this world of sorrow and pain,  
And returned to the land of thought again.

Hogg’s tales are now less well known than they were in MacDonald’s day. They have been obscured for us by the new popularity of Hogg’s novels, and by his continuing reputation as a poet. MacDonald clearly knew Hogg’s shorter fiction, however, and it seems to me likely that it influenced him generally, and occasionally in detail. Hogg’s fiction is marked by the regular juxtaposition of the commonplace and the other worldly, whether in the form of ghosts, or the peasant belief in fairies and omens, or in striking natural events which are viewed

as the intervention of Providence. He sets most of his tales in rural Scotland, and many of them tell of ordinary individuals caught up in narratives of melodramatic action which frequently borders on the unbelievable. (MacDonald, too, is constantly stretching the confines of probability.) While Hogg is clearly capable of solidly effective renderings of rural human society, he is more drawn towards locating his individuals in the wider context of nature—again, a balance towards which MacDonald tends.

Occasionally, too, one can find more precise details which suggest a direct influence, but I have time to describe only the most extensive that I have come across. Hogg has a tale called “Welldean Hall,” which contains a major character called Gibby Falconer and a less important one, a Highland gaoler called Malcolm who first appears on a page which has a reference to “Clan-Khattanich.” The tale contains a style of literary Highland English which is very close to that given to Duncan, the blind piper in *Malcolm*. Furthermore, “Welldean Hall” contains a ghost which is associated with a particular book in the library (compare [12] Mr. Raven in *Lilith*) and which is the ghost of a sinful ancestor (like the old captain in *Castle Warlock*). There is also a bibliophile who receives a terrific shock in the library (a little like Cupples in *Alec Forbes*) and also a crucial document and sum of money left, for a rightful owner, in the book guarded by the ghost (like Annie Anderson’s bank-note willed to her in the minister’s bible). The ghost, too, talks as MacDonald was inclined to think, informing its hearers that “I am now in the true world, and you still in the false one.” I do not see how this concentration of similarities to MacDonald’s writing can be accidental, and I am sure that there is scope for much further investigation of the influence on MacDonald of Hogg’s writing as a whole.

This brief account of some of the links between MacDonald and previous Scottish writing only scratches the surface of the topic. For example, had I had more time, I might have tried to explore a little, the relationship between MacDonald and the early 17C poet, William Drummond of Hawthornden, whose strong instincts for allegory and hidden meaning, and for a correspondence between literature and God’s meaning in the world, may well have helped bring out MacDonald’s own leanings in these directions. However, some other time, perhaps.

MacDonald drew on the Scottish literary past in no narrowly nationalistic spirit, and Scotland provided only some of the influences upon him which helped form his literary originality. Nevertheless, he was clearly proud of his Scottish literary heritage, and Scottish writing formed an important strand in his total sense of himself as a writer. In the literary sphere, as in the more general human

context, MacDonald valued his Scottish heritage and allowed it to help make him the writer he was. **[13]**