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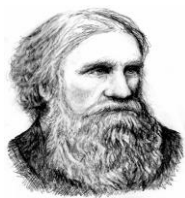
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Orts

The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 52

Members should by now have received *North Wind* 17 for 1998. The anonymous material in the front matter does not originate from the trustees of the MacDonald Society nor from anyone authorised by them.

MACDONALD-CHESTERTON CONFERENCE, OXFORD, SEPTEMBER. 1999



Please note that, due to a newly scheduled visitation by the Bishop, **the date of this conference has had to be changed to Saturday Sept. 18th 1999.** It will run from 10 a.m. to 4.30pm.

Planning will be helped if members and friends confirm as soon as possible that they hope to attend. Details of the programme are currently being finalised and will be sent out to everyone who expresses an interest. Please contact our Secretary, Deirdre Hayward at Cruister, SANDWICK, Shetlands, ZE2 9HN. Tel.01950 431587.

During the past decade or two the pattern of such conferences has totally changed. Long stylised lectures have been replaced by much shorter talks with ample time for open discussion. A plenary session for further discussion is provided at the end. Several of the principal British authorities on MacDonald will be contributing.

Many members attending the conference may wish to extend their visit to Oxford with an extra day before or afterwards. Accommodation will be available at Plater College if booked at least a week in advance at £20 per day including evening meal, or *pro rata*. If there is sufficient interest, John Docherty would be happy to lead a walk or walks through Oxford following the spiral route taken by Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, the book which MacDonald drew upon to create the structure of his masterpiece *Lilith*.

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM 2000 "THE FUTURE OF FANTASY—FANTASY OF
THE FUTURE—CALL FOR PAPERS

The Inklings Society for Literature and Aesthetics will hold an International Symposium with the above title in co-operation with the Rheinisch-Westfälische Hochschule at Aachen from May 5th—7th 2000. The symposium will assess the relationship and interactions between technological, scientific conceptions and literary concepts and images of the future. It will focus on the following topics, with, if possible, a special attention paid to the literary works of the Inklings:—

Transcending dimensions of space and time
Artificial man/woman—postbiological humanity
Interactions between fantastic literature and fantastic architecture.

The symposium will present about twelve talks. Languages will be English and German. As sufficient time should be given to discussion, a talk should not exceed 30 minutes. The talks will be considered for the yearbook of the Inklings Society. **Anyone considering presenting a paper should contact Karl Kegler as soon as possible.**

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THE MAN BORN TO BE KING

On Sunday September 26th 1999 at 3.30pm. our friends the **Dorothy Sayers Society** are performing readings of three of her cycle of plays about the life of Jesus. When first broadcast by the BBC in 1941 they were so perfectly tuned to the mood of the day that they caused a sensation. Like MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* and "The Gifts of the Child Christ", they give an a vivid picture of how ordinary people thought and felt at the particular point in time when they were written, yet are relevant for all time. Participants will include Lord Runcie, the novelists, P.D. James, H.R.F. Keating and Simon Brett, plus several well-known actors. Tickets are available from:

TMBTBK
Rose Cottage, Malthouse Lane,
HURSTPIERPOINT, W Sussex, BN6 9JY (s.a.e. please)

This should be an exceptionally rewarding performance. It will be held in London at The City Temple, Holborn Viaduct. All seats are £5 unreserved (buy 5 get 6).

NORTH AMERICAN SUBSCRIPTIONS

We understand that Debbie Johannesen has now rounded-off her accounts and is passing her

portfolio over to Emily Tobias. The address for all N. American subscription matters is thus now 6611 Lipscomb Drive, DURHAM, NC 27712.

(N.B. The address for all other subscriptions remains 8a Ramsey St, MONTROSE, DD10 8BS. Vivienne Forrest will probably be moving to another house in Montrose, but this will, of course, be announced in a future *Orts*.)

Debbie took over the job of North American Representative at short notice when the previous holder was ill and we are very grateful for how she has helped bring back N. American membership to its former level. A difficulty of having a member of Johannesens Printing and Publishing on the Committee of the Society was that the Charity Commissioners object to charities having board members who work for private companies in the same field. Manifestly, the Johannesens are worlds apart from the sort of companies the Commission is concerned about. But, with ever-increasing problems of funding, the Commission is now less able to discriminate in individual cases than would at one time have been the case.

The Society will, of course, continue to support the Johannesen's venture in every possible way, as it has done from the very beginning; and we trust that the exchange of visits, which have been a feature of the friendship, will continue.

APRIL-MAY 1999 NEW HAMPSHIRE WORKSHOP ON *THE WISE*
WOMAN AND PLANS FOR SUBSEQUENT WORKSHOPS

This was a great success. *The Lost Princess (The Wise Woman)* is less complicated than *Adela Cathcart*, the book studied at the last workshop, so new discoveries were less numerous, although still sufficient in quantity and quality to be written up in a paper for submission to *North Wind* or some other literary journal. The main purpose of such workshops, however, is to gain an appreciation of the spiritual depths (heights would be a better word) of the work studied. We came to appreciate the correctness of C.S. Lewis' view that the book, in its spiritual power, ranks amongst MacDonald's greatest works—a view which has been rejected by many critics. Hopefully it will be possible to convey something of this realisation in the paper:

The remarkable success of such workshops is primarily due to the impact of MacDonald's mythopoeia, powerful as it is for the solitary reader, becoming yet more powerful when studied in a group. His categorisation of *The Wise Woman* as a 'fable' is reasonable, but much of the book is mythopoeia of the highest quality.

The next best alternative to a residential workshop for exploring MacDonald's books is a local study-group, meeting regularly. The Charles Williams Society have realised that Williams' fiction also is far more powerful when studied in a group, and although they have less members than us, equally spread across the world, they still manage to run several study-groups. When three or four members start a successful local group of this kind they soon attract new people to join. Members too isolated for any possibility of group work ought to consider the opportunities offered by e-mail. Although the element of personal contact is very important when practicable, Mike Partridge's e-mail group is achieving remarkable things.

A disappointment at the New Hampshire workshop was that MacDonald Society members made

up only a small percentage of the people who attended. We realise that a three-day workshop in New Hampshire is unlikely to be accessible to members living outside New England, but on the basis of previous experience we had hoped to attract more New England members. (A few could not come because involved in May-Day festivities, although we had been unaware that this European festival was celebrated in America!) For future planning we would like to know which members might be prepared to come to New England for a longer workshop and which members might like to come to a short workshop of this type nearer to their home area.

We plan to hold the next such workshop in northern Italy, in the foothills of the Alps, hopefully in the Fall of 2000 or Spring of 2001. This will probably be a seven-day event. We hope to hold it in a beautiful old castle if repairs to earthquake cracks are completed in time. (Castles like this never fall on anyone in an earthquake, so we can positively guarantee that there is no chance of participants having 'a rough shaking'! But serious quakes can crack castle walls. The Italian government carries out any necessary repairs on such castles, on condition that they are opened to visitors for at least two weeks in the year, but accordingly they have a liability to ensure that the fabric is absolutely sound.)

There is a sad (but well-authenticated) story attached to this castle about a Templar knight who fled from the Order in disgust at a time when it was falling into decadence in some regions. He was given shelter by the lady of the castle, but was tracked down. He, the lady and her young children were all slain. Our MacDonald-loving friend who part-owns the castle claims to have seen their ghosts on many occasions. Be that as it may, the association of the castle with the escape of an Italian nobleman from a decadent religious order makes it imperative that for part of the week the workshop be devoted to *Within and Without*, MacDonald's first book, which begins with this same situation. MacDonald's appreciation of Dante will also be explored and there will be a one-day visit to Bordighera. The programme for the remaining days will be published in *Orts* as soon as it has been worked out. Planning would be helped if members interested in the possibility of attending the workshop notified us as soon as possible.

GEORGE MACDONALD AND OCTAVIA HILL

Our Chairman Richard Lines gave a talk at the National Trust Headquarters on May 10th on the subject of George MacDonald's life and work and the family's long friendship with Octavia Hill, quoting from some of Octavia's letters.

Robert Whelan, who addressed our AGM last year on Octavia Hill, wrote to Richard afterwards thanking him for '... a really splendid talk. The comments I heard were exceptionally favourable.'

The attention of members is drawn to the Octavia Hill Birthplace Museum at 1 South Brink Place, WIS BEACH, Cambs. PE 13 1SE Tel. 01 945 476368, where they have recently unveiled a mural depicting events in Octavia's life. George MacDonald appears in it.

Yet More on Aunt Judy and "Amelia".

William Webb has pointed out errors in the article in *Orts* 45 describing apparent borrowings

from 'Aunt Judy's' "Amelia and the Dwarfs" in *The Wise Woman*. One of the telling connections put forward in the article is the different meanings given to the phrase 'sleeping on the heath.' But MacDonald employed exactly the same imagery of the bed of living heath in "The Golden Key", published three years **before** the appearance of "Amelia and the Dwarfs". He is actually more consistent in this earlier story, never using the word 'heather', whereas in *The Wise Woman* he sometimes uses 'heath' and sometimes 'heather'—possibly because the two plants usually grow together on dry heaths. With MacDonald and Aunt Judy working in the same field of children's literature and having a mutual close friend in Lewis Carroll it is certain they would have been aware of each other's activities. But it does not seem likely that MacDonald's reuse of 'sleeping on the heath' imagery in *The Wise Woman* has anything to do with Aunt Judy, even though, when he refers to Rosamund sleeping upon the heath, he probably does intends a pun upon sleeping *out* upon the heath.

Incidentally, in Glenn Sadler's heavily abridged version of *The Wise Woman/The Lost Princess*, published by Eerdmans/Gracewing in 1992, in all the passages which Sadler retains where MacDonald refers to the bed of heath, Sadler substitutes 'heather' for 'heath'. This loses the pun, but does not otherwise seem to matter very much. Another botanical change which Sadler makes is far more damaging. He transforms into 'a pine grove' the sinister 'fir wood' which surrounds the heath where the Wise Woman dwells. Pine-groves have a totally different mood, quite unlike that accurately described by MacDonald for the fir wood, where 'the trees go stretching away up towards the moon and look as if they cared nothing about the creatures below them'. Only in a plantation of young trees is this true of pines.

H. O'C.

A transitional state to that of the 'far planet' of *Phantastes*.

In the middle of *Phantastes*, MacDonald's protagonist Anodos reads two stories in the library of the 'fairy palace'. The first of these stories describes men and women very different from human beings on Earth. They inhabit a 'far planet' similar in some ways to the present Saturn, but not identical with it. They differ most obviously from earthly humans in that the women have wings instead of arms. But, in that they do not need to work to feed and clothe themselves, they also apparently lack the solid material bodies possessed by present-day humanity on Earth.

Anodos is very interested in the description in the story of the way children are born there:

A maiden, walking alone, hears a cry: for even there a cry is the first utterance; and searching about, she findeth, under an overhanging rock, or within a clump of bushes, or, it may be, betwixt gray stones on the side of a hill, or in any other sheltered or unexpected spot, a little child. This she taketh tenderly, and beareth home with joy, calling out, 'Mother, mother'—if so be that her mother lives—I have got a baby—I have found a child! All the household gathers round to see;—'Where is it?' 'What is it like?' 'Where did you find it?' and such-like questions abounding. And thereupon she relates the whole story of the discovery, for by the circumstances, such as the season of the year, time of the day, condition of the air and such like, and, especially, the peculiar and never-repeated aspect of the heavens and earth at the time, and the nature of the place of shelter wherein it is found, is determined, or at least indicated, the nature of the child thus

discovered.

If these people experience any love other than maternal affection they instantly die. When Anodos, entering completely into the story, describes the different situation upon Earth to a group of them, some are possessed by 'an indescribable longing' for the greater potential for love available here.

Australian Aborigines, although they experience earthly human love, nevertheless are in some ways remarkably similar to the people whom MacDonald describes. This is evident from a description of the birth of an Australian Aboriginal child in David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*, New York: Vintage-Random House, 1996, 167. (Some unnecessarily patronising passages in Abram's account are omitted).

sexual intercourse . . . is thought, by traditional Aboriginal persons, [only] to prepare the woman for conception When the already pregnant woman is out on her daily round gathering roots and edible grubs, and she happens to step upon a song couplet [sung by an ancestor at that spot] the 'spirit child' lying beneath the ground at that spot slips up into her at that moment. . . . wherever the woman finds herself when she feels the quickening—the first kick within her womb—she knows that a spirit child has just leapt into her body And so she notes the precise place in the land where the quickening occurred, and reports this to the tribal elders. The elders then examine the land at that spot, discerning which Ancestor's song-line was involved and precisely which stanzas of that Ancestor's song will belong to the child.

In this manner, every Aboriginal person, at birth, inherits a particular stretch of song as his private property This land is that part of the Dreaming from which his life comes—it is that place on the Earth where he most belongs, and his essence, his deepest self, is indistinguishable from that terrain.

Book Review: Michael Phillips, *The Garden at the Edge of Beyond*, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998.

Michael Phillips has done more than anyone else to bring the name of George MacDonald to the attention of American Christians. Not only does he run his own publishing house, publishing MacDonald's books, reprints of major works of MacDonald criticism and various anthologies of MacDonald's writings; he also writes MacDonald-related books which are published by the major religious publishing house, Bethany House.

In explaining his rewrites of MacDonald's novels for Bethany House, Phillips states that he has to make them simple and fast-moving to appeal to a mass-audience, such as Bethany House seeks to attract. Clearly he does not feel that the same criteria have to apply to his own stories. His style in *The Garden at the Edge of Beyond* is lucid, but his exposition of MacDonald's theology is far from simple, except at its essential core. Moreover, it is not a fast-moving style: he remarks that 'time was always given in this place for thought and meditation' (133) and he is remarkably successful in replicating this in his text. Time for reflection is a quality which is sadly lacking from almost all American Christian fantasy writing, as Colin Manlove observes in

Christian Fantasy, so this quality in Phillips' book is highly welcome.

Since Phillips' book is representative of a widely-held view about MacDonald it deserves an extended review. Sadly, however, such a review would be impracticable and out-of-place in a newsletter. The following brief review is only able to touch upon a few of the more striking and important aspects of the book and does not do full justice to its many positive aspects.

As the title of *The Garden at the Edge of Beyond* suggests, the setting is the same as that of the main part of C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. Moreover Phillips, like Lewis, meets George MacDonald there in the purlieu of Heaven, in a MacDonald-style purgatory. But, while Lewis' MacDonald concentrates upon the rather specialised task of explaining why many types of people reject Heaven in favour of Hell, Phillips describes what one might expect to preoccupy a person newly arrived there—the general enlargement of his own religious understanding. It is difficult for any first-person narrator of a story to avoid being egotistical, and MacDonald therefore only uses a first-person narrator when he wants to depict egotistical, self-important 'heroes'. Phillips, however, enthusiastically embraces this limitation and some readers may feel that in this book he displays the sort of egotism which he correctly insists we must learn to relinquish.

Phillips, who in the story has had a heart attack, passes through a logical path of spiritual growth in the garden. The principal metaphor in the book is the scent of the Dowers in the garden. This is an appropriate and original metaphor, both because Paradise is frequently visualised in the Persian imagery of a perfumed garden and because scents are so evocative, Phillips employs this metaphor on innumerable occasions throughout most of the book. Some readers may feel that this creates a somewhat tedious story-line. Along with the more or less static setting of the story it makes for heavy reading.

A suspicious reader, faced with Phillips' mass or theological detail, is likely to fear that some unacceptable arguments may have slipped in unnoticed. For example, in chapters 25-27 the distinction between rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and total obedience to Mammon is lost, because Phillips appears to adopt Calvin's stance that all opposition is the task of the secular authority. Thus he makes his mentor at the time (the Virgin Mary) insist that the ordinary person must practice total submission to all who demand it (117-19).

For reasons like this, many readers, after the introductory chapters, may prefer to read the remaining chapters in reverse order. All are short and more-or-less self-contained, so this is not difficult. The reader then comes to the core conclusions first and so is in a far better position to appreciate and evaluate the arguments which lead up to them. In this way, both the strengths and the weaknesses of the book are better appreciated. The only problem with this approach is that the book concludes with Phillips returning to his house and finding that it 'appeared ruefully drab after the places I had been' (151). MacDonald, in a much-quoted passage describing a true vision in "The Shadows", emphasises that:

instead of making common things look commonplace, as a false vision would have done, it had made common things disclose the wonderful that was in them.

Many people will know the truth of this observation from their own experience, and if such people turn first to the end of *The Garden at the Edge of Beyond* they may well question the worth of reading any more of the book!

Although Phillips adopts the traditional image of a Paradise Garden, he suggests that other people, according to their particular interests, would find the purlieu of Heaven very different in character. He suggests, for example, that some would find 'athletic fields' (48). He makes no secret of the fact that he is an armchair gardener (e.g. 148), so we are not surprised to discover that he is a lover of magnificent specimen plants, placing great emphasis upon the huge size of their blooms. In this context one cannot help recalling the huge narcissus which lures Persephone into Hades and MacDonald's oblique allusion to this in *The Wise Woman* with the giant lily associated with the boy Ally's death. Anyone who has gone through a training in accurate detailed observation of the natural world, such as MacDonald describes in chapter 59 of *There and Back*, will be nauseated by the imbalance of all plants with overblown blooms. Yet Phillips depicts these as the model of what we must become (135). Temperance was once accepted as the central Virtue, and was seen as permeating all the other Virtues. Now Religion has followed the lead of Economics, and in both these realms Temperance has come to be despised as a vice.

A failure of precise observation is everywhere apparent in the small details of Phillips' descriptions. When, for example, he attempts to reproduce what he calls 'the dialect of [MacDonald's] former tongue' (51) it bears very little resemblance to the dialect in the novels. And alluding to the structure of the daisy flower he maintains it is not 'a complex flower like the rose' (106)!

The 'other side of the coin' to the absence of Temperance is the way there are few opposites in the garden Phillips describes. Apart from the flowers, most things are blended and 'all-purpose'. For example, there is no shade, it is incorporated into the light in the correct proportions for all situations! One is irresistibly reminded of the extravagant claims always made for new synthetic substitutes for natural products like milk or wood! Phillips in most matters carefully follows MacDonald in accepting the concept of 'as above, so below'. So his denial of opposites, which constitute one of the most basic principles of earthly existence, is highly disturbing. (When Mr Vane imagines the Earthly Paradise in a similar fashion at the end of *Lilith*, MacDonald makes it very clear that he is writing ironically.)

Where Phillips is less metaphorical and describes the desirable attributes to be learned by the soul in fairly conventional theological terms it is not so easy to perceive how much he diverges from MacDonald. This is because he does not always use the same terms as MacDonald, or uses them in somewhat different ways. Also he often first makes a statement which is an approximation to a complex truth and then subsequently qualifies it. This ought to be helpful, but in the context of his dense pattern of theological argument it is, in fact, very confusing. In some places, however, the conflict with MacDonald's views is striking.

With Phillips' theology, Earth existence becomes pointless, because every human weakness persisting at death will sooner or later be cured in purgatory. Referring to earthly life he maintains that 'opportunity of character is . . . laid equally before all' (59). This is manifestly untrue for some major classes of people, such as those with some types of chronic mental illness

and those who die in early childhood. The ways that MacDonald avoids these absurdities are not invariably satisfactory, but at least he recognises the problems.

Even where MacDonald's ideas are reproduced with tolerable accuracy by Phillips it is often difficult to recognise him in the pedant Phillips depicts:

'You now see', he said, 'that the Self the Master desires to be handed back to him is a relinquished Self, one thus elevated into the exalted blossom of a glorified brother or sister of Christ' (81).

There is a powerful strand of authoritarianism in MacDonald's Christianity. But Phillips isolates and magnifies this strand so that it becomes as excessive and intemperate as most of the blossoms he describes. For Bethany House to publish the book they must believe that Phillips' approach will appeal to the readership for whom they cater. We can thus assume that some readers of the book will go on and read MacDonald novels in the Bethany House rewritten editions. A few may even read unexpurgated versions of MacDonald's books, discovering that his Christianity is infinitely more profound than is discernible in the rewrites. But, against this positive gain, the serious effect which the rewrites are having must be considered. Largely because these retitled works are marketed as works of MacDonald's, he is increasingly being judged by them. No other major nineteenth century writers have had their works subjected to such subtle, or such large-scale, dumbing-down, and inevitably this is having a serious negative effect upon MacDonald's reputation. The increasing interest in his writings within evangelical circles in no way counter-balances this.

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