Orts: The George MacDonald Society Newsletter

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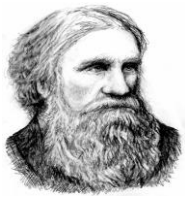
The George MacDonald Society



Orts

The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 56, Summer 2000

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO NORTH AMERICAN READERS.
Emily Tobias has not been able to obtain the record of members' past subscriptions. If your last subscription was not sent to Emily, **please inform Emily as soon as possible so that she can correct her records,** as otherwise we do not know if you are still a member.
If you have not yet paid your subscription for 2000 please send it to Emily as soon as possible.

BEDFORD MEETING - SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 9TH.

Just as Bunyan and Bedford go together, so do George MacDonald and *The Pilgrim's Progress* to those who are interested in the life of George MacDonald.

This lifelong connection began in MacDonald's childhood when he read and enjoyed *The Pilgrim's Progress* and continued through to his identification in later life with the character of 'Greatheart' by his friends.

The MacDonald family performed a number of dramas, many of which were written by Louisa, George MacDonald's wife. These performances were initially tied in with the work of their friend Octavia Hill and were produced for the entertainment of tenants within her housing projects.

The enterprise grew from this into performances for friends, either in their own homes or for gatherings in the MacDonalds' home. The one that became the most well-known was Louisa's dramatisation of the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It also became the most widely performed by the family. The talent of Lilia, the MacDonald's eldest daughter, in the role of Christiana, took the performance beyond the run-of-the-mill amateur production.

The family began to take their performance to venues around the country during the summer months in order to raise funds to enable them to spend the winter months in Italy where the climate was more helpful to them in their ever-present struggle against tuberculosis.

The schedule to which they worked was often gruelling as they travelled between venues with little time for rest. On occasion, if a family member fell ill, a friend would be called upon to fill the part rather than cancel or postpone the performance.

In the midst of all this activity, George MacDonald continued his writing, often correcting proofs between scenes.

As time went on, this pilgrimage in fact and in drama became a reflection of their own life pilgrimage and was recognised as such by those who knew them well. This involvement is one of the subjects that will be considered at the Bedford Meeting.

A scene from a MacDonald performance of *Pilgrim's Progress*. George appears here as Greatheart, with Lilia as Christiana.

MacDonald as Evangelist, in a scene from *Pilgrim's Progress.*

Rachel Johnson

Bunyan is revered in the Bedford area but not exploited. The church where he worshipped has an excellent, small museum devoted to him and an excellent small conference centre with a restaurant which we will use as our base.

Members may not be aware that Bunyan based the places in *The Pilgrim's Progress* on actual events near Bedford, and some are still astonishingly unspoilt. We will visit these places by coach with local members as our guides. One of them, the 'House Beautiful', has another connection of interest to lovers of MacDonald. This great house, architecturally one of the most important of its period, was built for the Countess of Pembroke, the sister for whom Sir Philip Sidney wrote his *Arcadia*—a work as important as *The Pilgrim's Progress* for MacDonald's writings, and anthologised by him in *A Cabinet of Gems*.

As mentioned in *Orts* 55, full details are available from Vivienne Forrest whose address is on the back cover. Bedford has excellent road, rail and (via Luton) air connections with all parts. There are a ring of car parks around the small town centre. The Meeting will start at 10am for 10-30 and run to 4pm. Inexpensive overnight accommodation can be arranged for anyone requiring it. There will be good opportunities for photography. Not all the places to be visited can accommodate large numbers so the group has to be limited to thirty people. Therefore:

early booking is recommended. Please send £5 deposit to Vivienne Forrest.

The total charge of £20 includes coach fare, lunch, and morning and afternoon tea and biscuits. The meeting is open to members of the MacDonald Society, their friends, and members of other literary societies.

THE SUPPRESSION OF MACDONALD'S FAIRY TALES – A SUCCESSFUL COUNTER-ATTACK

In issue No. 43 of *Orts* a review was published of the special "Censorship in Children's Literature" issue of the journal *Para*Doxa* (Vol. 2, parts 3-4, 1996). What was particularly brought out in this review was the way most contributors to that issue of *Para*Doxa* invert the normal meaning of 'censorship,' with the American contributors giving it the meaning of 'opposition to the censorship-by-exclusion policy pursued by many children's librarians in America.' Since the core of that exclusion policy is rejection of traditional values—particularly moral values—MacDonald's works have especially suffered and have all but disappeared from the libraries of public schools. We had expected that this would be a matter of deep concern to

readers of *Orts*, yet the review did not generate any response from our American members!

Now, three years later, an effective opposition has grown up, largely inspired by books written by the former American Secretary of State for Education, William J Bennett: *The Book of Virtues*; *The Children's Book of Heroes*, and *The Children's Book of Virtues*, published by Simon and Schuster. The success of Bennett's books has awakened some American publishers to the realisation that there is a widespread demand from young parents for guides which will help them to locate and to appreciate the classic children's stories. These people were the first generation to be deprived of access to most of the great works of children's literature, old and new, which were the birthright of previous generations. They are coming to realise the extent of their deprivation, but they are also coming to realise that these books can still be found and shared with their own children.

The chapter titles of *The Book of Virtues* are Self-discipline, Compassion, Responsibility, Friendship, Work, Courage, Perseverance, Honesty, Loyalty and Faith. In his introduction Bennett writes:

> There are many wonderful stories of virtue and vice with which children should be familiar. This book brings together some of the best, oldest and most moving of them. . . . Do our children know these works? Unfortunately many do not. They do not because in many places we are no longer teaching them. It is time to wake up to this task again.'

It is a useful touchstone with books like Bennett's to check whether they avoid mentioning MacDonald's works. Avoidance of his stories is very often an indicator of a tendency towards authoritarianism. But such books should not be shunned for this reason. A vigilant adult ought to be able to extract all that is of value from these reading guides without becoming entangled in any authoritarianism which is present. And the same is true for alert children with the stories themselves.

Penguin's willingness to publish a fine new edition of MacDonald's shorter fairy tales, briefly reviewed in *Orts* 55, is one example of the renewed interest in traditional tales inspired by Bennett. There are now apparently various Bennett-inspired literary guides in print, but so far we have only learned of two. One is *A Call to Character* by Colin Greer and Herbert Kohle, published by Simon and Schuster, with sections on Courage, Self-discipline, Integrity, Creativity, Playfulness, Loyalty, Generosity, Empathy, Honesty, Idealism, Compassion and Love. The other work is Vigen Guroian's book reviewed below.

***Vigen Guroian. Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination.* New York: Oxford UP, 1998. pp. 198, h.b. $22.**

The first thing which must be said is that the books surveyed in this guide, plus those briefly mentioned in Guroian's concluding "Bibliographic Essay," are fine stories. Moreover his analyses are sensitive and penetrating.

In exploring the books he has chosen, Guroian does not talk down to his readers, but his approach should be understandable and enjoyable to anyone likely to take up his book. He adopts

a very different proselytising style for his introductory chapter. It is difficult to see the purpose of this as his title will only attract people who already recognise the necessity for awakening the moral imagination. This introduction may, however, help readers to 'spread the light' amongst their friends who have children.

Guroian provides a particularly fine analysis of *The Wind in the Willows*, where friendship between equals is what develops the moral imagination. But in general he seems to favour stories where a mentor guides a child. He realises that few things are more beneficial for a child than reverence for a worthy adult mentor, yet he tends to see this mentor's role as an authoritarian one and the child without such a mentor as hopelessly lost. He asserts that: 'Virtue and the moral imagination are practically inconceivable apart from the rich soil of friendship' (87). There are many people however who can testify from their own experience that MacDonald's fairy stories are powerful enough to awaken moral imagination even in a child *not* fortunate enough to be rooted in such soil.

This attitude leads Guroian to a bias in favour of particular categories of stories. Toys are only indirectly subject to the consequences of the Fall, so they can be seen as particularly promising subjects for moral rehabilitation. Thus he gives stories featuring toys an amount of space not really merited by this sub-genre, even though two of the examples which he selects, *Pinocchio* and *The Velveteen Rabbit* ™, are amongst the best. (One has to say this of the latter story now that it has been trademarked, because ownership of a trademark confers far more power than ownership of a copyright and it could prove very expensive to comment otherwise!)

Writers and artists have always realised that some aspects of animal behaviour offer splendid moral examples to humans. Stories about noble animals, however, are as likely to slide from simple moralising into simplistic moralising as are toy stories or the very similar stories about machines and their feelings. With accounts of animal behaviour there is the further temptation not simply to leave aside traits which are considered ignoble but actually to conceal them. Moreover, some authors cannot avoid the temptation to embroider wholly fanciful morality onto animal stories which purport to be realistic. This happens in *Bambi*. Guroian is careful to emphasise the humility of the stag who [sic] is a mentor to Bambi, but this detail is a particularly deplorable example of dishonest anthropomorphism.

With what Guroian recognises as the most important topics, such as immorality and immortality, he is impatient that the moral message of stories must be as overt as possible. So he turns to works like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Little Mermaid*, although he admits that the clumsy allegory of Christian immortality at the end of *The Little Mermaid* does not live up to the very high quality of the rest of Anderson's story. J.R.R. Tolkien, in his famous essay "On Fairy Tales" and elsewhere, implies that an obsessive desire to make the didactic message in children's 'fantasy stories' as powerful as possible often leads to the careless introduction of unnecessary 'fanciful' details. These, he maintains, can ruin a story for children, who are more sensitive to such uglinesses than are most adults. Details of this sort include the tinned sardines imported into Narnia from our world in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and the blue hair of the good fairy in *Pinocchio*. Sensitive children who react strongly against such 'false notes' may, however, be reacting primarily to subconscious perceptions of a patronising approach or a hidden agenda. They tend to be tolerant of honest clumsiness, but

project moral apprehensions which they are unable to articulate onto any incongruities which they happen to perceive.

With MacDonald's works, Guroian devotes ten pages to *The Princess and the Goblin* and half a page each to "Little Daylight," *The Golden Key,* and *The Princess and Curdie*. This compares with twenty pages for *Pinocchio* and nine for *Bambi*. The attention he gives to *The Princess and the Goblin* seems to be due to the very high praise given to it by his chosen mentor G.K. Chesterton. But having elected to analyse the story he does so with quite exceptional sensitivity. His Catholic approach illuminates all the greatest depths of the story. One cannot however agree with his astonishing assessment that MacDonald 'eschewed both the popular penchant for so- called practical stories about "real life" and the untrained appetite for sentimental stories suffused with warm feelings' (142). MacDonald deliberately took up these genres (the 'practical, real-life' story in *Gutta Percha Willie* and the sentimental, warmly feeling story in many of his novels) but then subtly transformed them into profound explorations of reality. Guroian, however, is fortunate in apparently being unaware of the bowdlerising modern rewrites of these stories, which strip away everything which differentiates them from the debased popular works which he and MacDonald both dislike so intensely.

Guroian writes of MacDonald's 'extraordinary oral storytelling powers' (145), but in the dedication to *Dealings With the Fairies* MacDonald writes: 'My children, you know that I do not tell you stories as some papas do.' It is difficult to believe that MacDonald was not a fine oral storyteller to children, as he certainly was to young adults, but much more difficult to believe that he would have lied about this. Guroian also slips up where he believes he recognises an 'implied biological relationship' between Irene and her 'great great grandmother.' From the way that the similar great grandmother in *Phantastes* describes herself it is clear that the 'great' and 'grand' refer solely to spiritual qualities:—Guroian is, of course, well aware that the words primarily carry this meaning. As a good Catholic, he sees grandmother Irene as Mary, which is reasonable enough. But more than this she is the Sophia most clearly understood by the Orthodox Church. His exploration of how Irene gains the seven cardinal and spiritual virtues deserves particularly careful study because, although of crucial importance, it is something which has received very little previous attention.

Guroian, naturally, is opposed to reductionist criticism of MacDonald's writings. But he fails to take account of MacDonald's deep understanding of aspects of human psychology often assumed to have remained unexplored until near the end of the nineteenth century. MacDonald integrates his psychological with his spiritual understanding. His best critics attempt to explore how he does this, but, inevitably, they sometimes do not do so very well. Guroian can be unduly harsh towards these lapses. His dismissal of Jack Zipes' outstanding studies is likely to work against the values he himself espouses, as is some of his criticism of Rod McGillis' collection of essays by different authors on MacDonald: *For the Childlike*. But he always gives a fair summary of the views he is criticising and he can praise these same writers in other contexts. For example, although he is harsh on some of Maurice Sendak's incautious comments in *Caldecott & Co*. (40-41) he praises *Where the Wild Things Are* very highly.

Our member Nancy Mellon's new book on telling and reading stories to children will be published this summer by Hawthorn Press. Although primarily devoted to the telling of stories to

young children, it also emphasises the great value of MacDonald's tales. We are always grateful to receive details of other new books of this type and or the critical reception they have received.

Summer Schools and Conferences on Children's Literature

The National Centre for Research in Children's Literature at Roehampton in Surrey are inaugurating a biennial International Summer School of two weeks duration. This is open to anyone in a position to obtain funding. 'Its purpose is to provide a forum at which students and researchers can learn from each other, find out what is happening in other countries, and generally broaden their knowledge of the subject.' The 2000 School runs from July 30th-Aug. 13th, but participants who can only manage one week are welcome. Details from NCRCL, Univ. of Surrey Roehampton, Digby Stuart College, London SWl5 5PH.
Email: ncrcl@rochampton.ac.uk.

The Centre for International Research in Childhood: Literature, Culture and Media at Reading will hold a 4-day International Conference on "National and Cultural Identity in Children's Literature and Media" from April 5th-8th 200l. Contributions are invited and proposals of 400 words should be sent to Dr J Dolan, CIRCL, Dept. of English, Univ. of Reading, Whiteknights, PO Box 218, READING; RG6 6AA. Email: j.dolan@reading.ac.uk.

Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites - The Tate Gallery, London.

Do not miss this exhibition if you are in London before the end of May! In some ways it gives us an even more moving portrait of Ruskin than does his autobiography *Prœterita*. The combination of moral passion, craftsmanship and scientific understanding which underpins his drawings of nature and of architecture will probably never be surpassed. The exhibition includes a superb collection of these works from the Ruskin Centre at Lancaster University. Like Turner, Ruskin also possessed the imagination fearlessly to transform faithful perception and delineation of such natural features as storms and cataracts and sunsets into powerful allegories. It is no wonder that he and MacDonald were attracted to each other. Yet it is astonishing how carefully any mention of the MacDonalds is avoided in the exhibition. For example, Ruskin's last meetings with Rose La Touche are carefully documented, yet there is no mention of the MacDonald's role in arranging them. Similarly Ruskin's coaching of Louise Virenda Blandy is mentioned and illustrated with their paintings. But when she is subsequently described as marrying and going to live in Asheville, NC with her school-teacher husband this husband is not named.

Ruskin's first portrait of Rose La Touche

The exhibition tries to wring every drop of sentiment out of Ruskin's relationship with Rose. This is not difficult, given his extraordinary series of pictures of her rapid decline, from a striking initial portrait of 1858 where she looks like an Irish Alice Liddell to an emaciated death-bed sketch. His series of self portraits over the same period are equally tragic. His associated paintings of wild roses are yet more moving—or would be if the exhibition did not underline the allegory so heavily. All these

paintings should help people better to understand MacDonald's oblique but penetrating analysis of Ruskin's and Rose's tragedy in *Wilfrid Cumbermede.*

The preceding Room 8 is largely filled with some of the Tate's best-known works by painters of the Aesthetic Movement. The special pleading here is more insidious. It is claimed that 'this room shows that Ruskin's relationship with the artists associated with the Aesthetic movement was more complex, and more positive, than the clash with Whistler suggests.' Certainly Ruskin acknowledged the technical competence of some of these paintings. But to suggest that the author of books like *Modern Painters*, *Fors Clavigra* and *Unto This Last*, however much downcast by the evils of the time, might respond positively to works celebrating 'beauty [as] the new religion' is going too far. Beauty cannot exist in a vacuum where moral/spiritual truth is absent, and that is the case with the majority of these paintings. Their representations of the human being are merely decorative, even though most pretend to allegorise spiritual qualities, as, for example, with G.F. Watts' *Psyche*. The earlier rooms, by contrast, have a splendid selection of the paintings Ruskin wrote about so brilliantly in his books. Many are accompanied by his own analytical copies, and in the case of the landscapes by his own paintings of the same vistas.

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The Essence of a Great Writer by Robert Abendschan

Why read? Why do I read? As I boy growing up I read only what I had to in order to get by. Reading didn't figure into my top ten most desirable things to do. Many were the days when in my bedroom, with my guitar sitting on the floor at left, and my school books resting on my desk, that the guitar won out over the student.

But today it's a different story. I read for several reasons. My Bible is my source of spiritual food and light for my life. I read it to grow closer to God and to survive day to day as a pilgrim on this planet. I read (non-materialist) science books to marvel at the mastery of God's wonderful creation. I read fiction as an avenue of escape from the pressures and stresses of life and I've found the writings of George MacDonald among the best for accomplishing this.

I've read literary criticisms of George's writing that place his fantasies among the best ever written; he was a true pioneer in this field. I've read both *Lilith* and *Phantastes*, and some of his short fantasies, all of which were great fun to read. My own personal problem came from lack of understanding of the symbolism used.* I asked about this and was given some help which made sense as I read it; but at the same time I scratched my head and said to myself: 'How did he figure that out?' Then, to make matters worse, my lovely wife Sandra spoke intelligently of the same symbolism. I have no doubt it is there and I plan to read *Phantastes* and *Lilith* again, much slower next time.

Where I have found my greatest escape is in George MacDonald's romance novels. I am not a schooled literary critic by any means, but for my part, I find it quite easy to get lost in MacDonald's characters, mainly due to their simple complexity. Some readers might say I've penned an oxymoron with these two words, but MacDonald liked oxymorons. Some of his male characters are simple in that as men they are easy to identify with, they have their frailties and character defects much the same as I, yet they are complex in their reasoning and their grasp of the intricacies of life. My thoughts are that each person included in George's novels is born out

of who George was. But then, isn't that what makes a great writer.

Finally, what little bit of his poetry I have read so far has convinced me I have leagues to go to be comparable as a poet. But I leave you with these few lines of verse that express my thoughts.

A greater writer there cannot be
Than he who exposes his life to me
In ways that help me understand
The truest essence of the man.
From dark to light, from in to out,
From up or down there is no doubt
That George a portrait has penned for me
In words: the man he came to be.

*** Editor's Note.** What Robert writes about understanding MacDonald's symbolism is a real problem for every reader. But there is no doubt MacDonald *wanted* readers to have to struggle. He saw two spiritual laws as crucial. One is that many great spiritual truths are so different in kind from anything in our everyday materialistic existence that there are no words for them in our language and they can *only* be represented in symbols (MacDonald emphasises this in *Lilith* chapter 9). The second law is that *any and every* important truth is valueless if simply 'cast before swine.' Yet there is a lazy (swinish) side in every one of us which expects texts which we can simply wallow in. I have come to know Robert well enough to recognise that such 'wallowing' is wholly unrelated to the positive withdrawal from materialistic pressures implied by his use of the word 'escape.' But the rewrites of MacDonald available in America do tempt all too many people to wallow in sentimentality (see Vigen Guroian's comment about 'the untrained appetite for sentimental stories' on p.5 above.)

MacDonald does much to help and encourage the struggling reader, particularly by allusions to other great authors who strove to depict the same spiritual truths. Sadly, many of these authors are no longer read widely. What is badly needed, therefore, is a publisher willing to bring out editions of *Phantastes* and *Lilith* where extracts from these other authors are presented in such a way as to provide present-day readers with the help MacDonald intended us to have, but without curtailing our joy of discovery in any way. In the meantime, much can be understood in *Lilith* and *Phantastes* when it is noticed that all the main characters in *Lilith*—with the exception of Adam's daughters—are also main characters in *Phantastes*, although, of course, bearing different names there.

Other issues which Robert raises here are almost equally important and I shall be writing to him about them. I shall be happy to forward to him any comments you may have.

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The Elizabeth Gaskell Society by William Webb

Many U.K. members must have seen the TV version of Mrs Gaskell's novel *Wives and Daughters*, which was on out screens earlier this year, and probably enjoyed its faithful treatment of an unfamiliar story. It is a sign that the English novel was in an unusually flourishing condition that a writer like Elizabeth Gaskell could then be grouped among the lesser lights!

In a related programme viewers were also introduced to the newly founded Gaskell Society. Humphrey Carpenter made a splendid series of programmes for Radio 4 on British Literary Societies and hopes to include the MacDonald Society if another series is made, but this seemed to be a unique event on television; we discovered what the members actually looked like, and saw the Society in action—even going abroad.

Mrs Gaskell was at home with all kinds of material, tragic as well as comic. An authority wrote soon after her own time: 'What was most characteristic as well as most fascinating in her was the sympathetic force of the generous spirit which animated her singularly clear and reasonable mind.'

From *Cranford* on to the novels of social problems, Mrs Gaskell's works are well worth knowing better. (Incidentally, in contrast to MacDonald, Mrs Gaskell's husband found satisfaction and peace of mind in his duties as a nonconformist minister.) Details of the Gaskell Society can be obtained by contacting:

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Over Tabley
KNUTSFORD
Cheshire, WA11 6HN
Tel. (0) 1565 634668.

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Address for correspondence and *Orts* contributions:
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9 Medway Drive, FOREST ROW, RH18 5NU, U.K.
Tel. & Fax: [0]1342 82 3859

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Society web site: www.georgemacdonald.com

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E-mail enquiry service: gmsociety@bigfoot.com
We have now been given a larger computer so should be on-line very soon.

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Address for contributions to *North Wind*:
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Manuscripts, preferably on disc with hard copy, should be presented in accordance with the guidelines indicated in the latest edition of the MHRA Style Book and should observe the spelling usage of Chambers English Dictionary.

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