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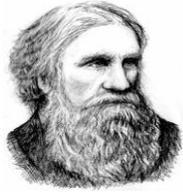
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Orts

The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 57, Autumn/Fall 2000

GORDON 2000 4th-6th August

After a lot of problems, our plans to involve the MacDonald Society in this important event are now in place, thanks to the encouragement of many people. When it seemed that cost would prevent us from having an official display/stall, the Aberdeenshire Library Service generously offered us the use of the main meeting-room at the Brander Library and Museum building in Huntly Town Square. There is a fine MacDonald display case in the Museum full of objects such as costumes from the family's performances of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and we hope that visitors will go on from there to visit us. Larry Fink's splendid video on MacDonald will be running throughout the event. Ian Blakemore will have his catalogues and his books of MacDonald interest for sale in a separate display and visitors will, of course, be directed between the two.

Vivienne Forrest

BEDFORD WHOLE-DAY MEETING Sept. 2nd.

If you wish to participate in this meeting and have not yet booked you are advised to confirm with the Treasurer as soon as possible.

Illustrations: left Stevington Cross, where Christian lost his burden. below Elstow Moot Hall, the centre of Vanity Fair.



***The Life of Lady Byron* by Ethel Colburn Mayne London: Constable, 1929**

Finding this book on sale at a second-hand booksellers for 40p I purchased it for the Society's collection. It is not wholly reliable (for example Ms Mayne claims that the dedication to Lady

Byron first appeared in the first American edition of *David Elginbrod* in 1872), but it makes fascinating reading for a MacDonald enthusiast. Anyone bewildered by the inordinate number of titled people in MacDonald's novels and their astonishing behaviour will find some explanations in this book. MacDonald was the confidant of Lady Byron in her later years and although he never, of course, disclosed her confidences it seems they were a major source of inspiration for him when he came to write those of his novels which are set wholly or partly in England.

MacDonald is first mentioned by Ms Mayne in connection with the concern for the lower orders which Lady Byron developed late in life and which he eulogised in poems dedicated to her.

Lady Byron was to MacDonald the protectress, the adviser, and once at least the extremely rigorous critic. . . . He was as yet quite unknown, either as poet or novelist, married, struggling for a livelihood. Thirty-one, a handsome Highlander, raven-haired, aquiline, keen-eyed, of unorthodox faith, no ascetic (for, in the one vivid phrase—and that a quotation—found in his friend Johnson's Memoir, "he came eating and drinking"), George MacDonald at once awoke the protective impulse, and the critical impulse too. A pronounced idealist, he stirred to protest the realist in her on whom realism had so pitilessly been forced. She recommended "a course of the Newgate Calendar"; and whatever his surprise at this from the impressive, ermine-cloaked lady, he had humour enough to see the fun of it. But when she wrote in far more destructive criticism of his public readings of poetry, the Highlander in him rebelled. He used the sanctioned phrase, "a true sign of friendship"—true sign of a wry face in the user; but added that hers was not the universal opinion. Something painful he granted there must be—it was for *him* to find out what it was. Had he but known, she went a good deal further than painful—had pronounced the excess of emotion to be "intolerable," and feared he could never succeed as a lecturer. (We know that he did succeed, whether or not by obedience to her strictures.)

'But by that time their friendship was too secure to be shaken by home truths. In a packet of letters to him, written during these five years before her death . . . we find many a proof of her active interest. "I hope my play will be wicked enough to please you," wrote he, sending the MS.; and she of an unexpected visit from him: "You shall be treated most inhospitably—put into a room apart with a private entrance. . . . No note will be taken of you goings out and comings in. When socially disposed you will *invite yourself*. My house has often been called Liberty Hall." That is unexpected . . .

'The already quoted dedication of *David Elginbrod* to her memory . . . is sufficient proof of what their friendship had meant to George MacDonald and his wife; their children, as a letter in 1922 from one of the daughters testifies, "grew up in the knowledge of our parents love and reverence for her." She confided part of her story to him; in verse he recorded the memory and the effect it had upon his own anger in 1869, when Blackwood's and the Quarterly were reviling her who had been nine years in her grave.

Dead, why defend thee who in life
For thy worst foe had died;
Thou who, thy name a word of strife,
Didst silent stand aside?

Grand in forgiveness, what to thee
The big world's puny prate!
Or thy great heart has ceased to be,
Or loveth still its mate!

In a private letter he wrote: "I would as soon discuss my father and mother as her. This much only would I say, that knowing her for years, I counted her one of the noblest as well as one of the ablest of women; and that so far from being coldhearted, I believe she loved her husband to the last, whatever the *last* may he interpreted as being. "

'The flirt in the library'—a compromise hypothesis.

Biographers and critics of MacDonald often comment upon the repeated appearance in his early novels of an encounter with a flirt in a great private library. In most of these works there is the additional element that the hero is powerfully influenced by German Romantic books in the library. Under these circumstances there has naturally been speculation that MacDonald is drawing upon his own experiences. This is supported—although only at fourth-hand—by a comment in Greville MacDonald's biography that his father's friend Robert Troup had noted that he knew by hearsay that MacDonald had 'spent a year at a nobleman's house in one of the most northern counties of Scotland . . . chiefly, I believe, in arranging and cataloguing the large library.' This, however, could only have occurred during a one-year break in the middle of MacDonald's degree studies at Aberdeen, and Glenn Sadler has shown that letters MacDonald wrote confirm that he did not spend anything like a whole year away from home during that time.

Further speculation that the 'house' was Thurso Castle, where the owner had had some business connections with MacDonald's father is disproved by a letter quoted by Rolland Hein in *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker* (410) where MacDonald states that when he left Scotland, 'Aberdeen, Banff, Cullen and Huntly' were the only places he knew. He must, however, have known the country between these places, and, as Hein acknowledges, this region contains many fine noblemen's dwellings. If MacDonald did get work in the library of one of them and then was quickly thrown out the matter would have been hushed up. But rumours could not have been suppressed in the closely knit community of Huntly and inaccurate but flattering accounts, such as that which Robert Troup records, might have been deliberately encouraged by the family.

The writings of the German Romantics were extremely important to MacDonald, yet when his heroes delightedly discover fine collections of these works in the private libraries of their employers it has astonishingly little influence upon the plots of the stories. This makes it very likely that these passages are essentially autobiographical, particularly as MacDonald's early published works contains numerous well authenticated autobiographical details. Modern critics seem to have assumed that he would have had to work at the hypothetical library for an appreciable period to find time to read the German books. But once he realised their importance to him he would have sought out copies when back studying at Aberdeen. Contemporary interest in the German Romantics had been vastly greater in Scotland than in England, so the university librarian, or even MacDonald's remarkable professor William Gregory, could have told him

where to locate such volumes.

Whether or not there was a young woman in the library is more problematical. MacDonald was the sort of passionate young man for whom such an adventure would not have been out of character. But most of his heroes link courtship and culture, even where no big library is involved, so it seems equally likely, as one or two biographers have suggested, that he fictionalised his rejection by his cousin Helen MacKay into an episode which made a very effective focal point for the sort of stories he was writing.

U.C. Knoepfelmacher *Ventures into Childhood Chicago*: Chicago UP, 1998.

This book has now (2000) been reprinted in paperback (with one of Arthur Hughes' illustrations of North Wind on the cover) at the very reasonable price of \$20 (£ 14) for 444 pages. The chapters on "The Light Princess" (33 pages) and *At the Back of the North Wind* (40 pages) are the most extensive studies of these works yet published. Like most of Knoepfelmacher's studies, they contain abundant new and stimulating insights. However these are twisted into a massive work of post-modernist scholarship to shore up a simple thesis which could scarcely stand without them.

Although Knoepfelmacher's treatment of the character Diamond in his chapter on *At the Back of the North Wind* is in general a sensitive one, his allusions to the boy in his later chapters which explore the works of three female writers for children, Jean Ingelow, Juliana Horatia Ewing and Christina Rossetti, tend to be disparaging. In these chapters the allusions to Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books and to John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* are equally condemnatory. In addition, the chapter specifically devoted to Ruskin is also largely condemnatory. It seems Knoepfelmacher is attempting to maintain a scholarly balance yet at the same time trying to reflect modern interpretations of the opinions of his three female authors—his subtitle is *Victorians, Fairy Tales and Femininity*. He demonstrates that these women wrote in conscious opposition to the male authors examined in his earlier chapters (as those authors did to each other).

In his concern that these female writers have been badly treated by modern critics Knoepfelmacher appears to exaggerate the trenchant outlooks of Ingelow and Ewing and perhaps even Rossetti's. He justifiably complains that:

instead of exploring the cultural causes that led women who wrote for children in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to endorse realism, reason and the "grown-up values associated with mature reflection," critics prefer to denounce all such efforts for their resistance to fantasy (22-23).

His re-evaluation is welcome, but his arguments are weakened by his 'politically correct' interpretation of the concepts of 'realism,' 'reason' and 'fantasy.'

Knoepfelmacher recognises that responsible writers for children must confront their own self-division before they can help children achieve a balance between Innocence and Experience. He argues, however, that his chosen male authors 'turned to child readers *in order* to confront their own self-division between adults and children' (6, italics added). A consequence of this not-so-

subtle deflection of emphasis is a disregard for crucial (spiritual) aspects of their writings. These authors knew they ought to be aware of their failings before they could write worth-while stories, but Knoepflmacher recognises numerous negative effects of their inadequacies in their writings (effects which tend to divide fairly equally into the self evident and the implausible). These writers balanced upon their vices in the way the Virtues are depicted in early mediaeval church carvings dependent for their very being on their balance upon the corresponding vices (a psychological insight lost when it became the fashion to depict the vices as trampled underfoot). Knoepflmacher enlists all the techniques of modern scholarship to demonstrate how these authors stood in the gutter—something which would simply have been taken for granted in what Ruskin calls a 'noble age.' Yet when dealing with Carroll and Ruskin—and with MacDonald to a lesser degree—he does not acknowledge the extent to which their humble recognition of their situation enables them to reach to the skies, even though he does explore this very sensitively with his fourth male writer, William Makepeace Thackeray.

There is an obvious gap in Knoepflmacher's selection of male authors, as he acknowledges. Had he included Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, many details in the writings of Carroll and MacDonald which he attributes to their personal weaknesses would have been recognised; as acknowledgement of Kingsley's critical parody of *Phantastes*. Moreover, Kingsley's desire to draw most of his imagery from careful scientific observation of the world around him would have obliged Knoepflmacher to adopt a more reasonable approach to Ruskin. Knoepflmacher's narrow interpretation of what constitutes a scientific approach does not matter with his analysis of Thackeray's psychological fantasy *The Rose and the Ring*. But a more balanced view is necessary to understand Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* and—less obviously—to comprehend the importance of MacDonald's and Carroll's scientific outlook as expressed in their fiction. The way Knoepflmacher's chosen definition of a scientific approach undermines the validity of many of his conclusions is particularly evident in his study of Ruskin, and this is something which deserves close attention in view of Ruskin's long friendship with MacDonald.

With *The King of the Golden River*, Ruskin was the first writer in England seriously to take advantage of the freedom in handling traditional fairy-tale forms developed by the German Romantics in the literary fairy tales termed *Kunstmärchen*. Ruskin takes up this composite genre to tell a story of the environmental (and associated human) degradation which he observed taking place in the Swiss Alps. This same theme recurs in preface after preface of the books which he wrote around the middle of the nineteenth century. Yet although Knoepflmacher at one point recognises South West Wind, Esquire and the King of the Golden River as personified nature forces (230), he nevertheless persists in treating them as traditional fairy-tale characters.

Ruskin's hero Gluck attempts to understand and work with these forces of nature instead of doing the manly thing and striving to subdue them by constructing flood barriers and the like. Because of this, Knoepflmacher subjects him and his creator to an astonishing degree of abuse. He dismisses Ruskin's all-important ecology and his Christian overtones as 'mere elaborations for a core fantasy' (5). He even describes the 'mercantile mindset' of Gluck's brothers as 'exaggerated' (67), which—in view of many of the present activities of multinational companies in undeveloped countries—suggests that he must be living in an exceptionally secure ivory tower.

Knoepflmacher's comment that Ruskin 'elide[s] the elementary identification of child with

parent, so central, as Bettelheim and others have shown, to the basic format of the fairy tale' (55) indicates that he wishes to deny that Ruskin's story is a *Kunstmärchen*, a representative of a genre which only occasionally adheres to this 'basic format.' One traditional story in the Grimm's collection which Ruskin draws upon is "The Water of Life." In this story the symbolism of the water is wholly spiritual, so Knoepflmacher again lambastes Ruskin for not emphasising this aspect. Yet at the same time he has no high opinion of the traditional tales, suggesting that the originals of this sort of tale were intended primarily as 'fantasies of upward mobility' (66). Doubtless this was true at some stages in the history of the tales, but a remark of Ruskin's in *The Queen of the Air* is pertinent here: 'the real meaning of any myth is that which it has at the noblest age of the nation among whom it is current' (I, 7).

Gluck's growth in Ruskin's story is intellectual, moral and spiritual, but these aspects of growth are of so little importance for Knoepflmacher's thesis that he repeatedly disparages Ruskin for his 'hostility to growth' (e.g. 5), omitting to note that hostility to real growth precisely characterises the black brothers. He describes the King as a 'miniaturised male' (10); 'arrested' in growth like Gluck (70). He evades recognising that the King is the concentrated 'essence' of the Treasure Valley reduced to hard currency by a personage whom the King calls 'a stronger king' and is clearly Mammon. He expounds at considerable length upon Ruskin's 'suppressed cruelty' where the King puts a stop to the brother's mercantile activities (e.g. 235). In this he ignores the fact that the King had himself been turned to stone (gold) by the activities of the brothers and others like them. Moreover the King hardly changes the brothers at all—spiritually they have been black stones for a very long time.

Some details of Knoepflmacher's Freudian analysis of the story, such as his interpretation of South-West Wind Esquire's visits to the brothers, are too obscene to quote (61-62). An otherwise typical comment in this mode is: 'Ruskin ' could symbolically animate the desire to feed upon a mother's breast when he allowed Gluck to regain sole access to the nutrients offered by a newly oozing Treasure Valley' (17).

Knoepflmacher's denigration of Ruskin's scientific research is most overt where he comments that in a passage in Ruskin's autobiography *Proeterita*: 'his botanical expeditions are made to appear far more significant than any creative efforts' (43). This sentence is typical of Knoepflmacher's deconstructional approach throughout the book. The actual passage he is referring to in Ruskin's autobiography (vol II parts 59-64) contradicts it in no less than three places: Ruskin was not upon an 'expedition'—he was studying common wayside plants while convalescing at Leamington. These studies are not 'made to appear . . . significant,' he thought they were important to him and they certainly were. He does disarmingly admit that the artistic activities he attempted at that period were all misguided, but of course he does not apply this verdict to most of his artistic creativity.

Knoepflmacher again seeks to undermine Ruskin's botanical studies when he scathingly alludes to his *Proserpina* (this despite the fact that the critic to whom he refers readers for an analysis of the book is very positive about it- 275). Ruskin takes up Goethe's scientific method, which combines precise observation with deep feeling. His description of the development of a Primrose flower is his own, but in his feelings towards this development he clearly seeks to affirm the accuracy of MacDonald's many allusions to this flower, notably that in *Phantastes*

chapter 3. Knoepfmacher criticises the 'infantalizing attributes' given to the Primrose, but MacDonald characteristically emphasises these attributes because the Primrose is a flower of early spring which he wishes to contrast with the Rose. Anyone who has applied Goethe's approach in an unprejudiced spirit will know how profoundly it enriches both one's knowledge and one's feelings. But it is worthless to exploiters of nature, who therefore despise it, so Knoepfmacher is confident in denigrating it himself.

Some of Knoepfmacher's criticism of MacDonald is suspect. He does not substantiate all the new details he provides, such as the date when "The Light Princess" was written (118). Other details, such as his description of *Phantastes* as 'disjointed' (118 and 119) were already anachronistic by 1998. He tends to play down MacDonald's obvious sexual imagery, but, as with *The King of the Golden River*, finds numerous unlikely examples. For example, Princess Makemnoit in "The Light Princess" certainly has masculine characteristics, but he perceives her snake as a phallic appendage which deflowers the lake (134-35, 141, 144). MacDonald's description is an unmistakable metaphor for the kundalini principle of Hindu psychology, whereas this creature which uncoils before striking upwards is decidedly curious for a phallic symbol. The invariable crudity of Knoepfmacher's Freudian deconstructions is reminiscent of that popular with American critics fifty years ago.

This deconstructional approach prevents Knoepfmacher from acknowledging the symbolism underlying North Wind's role. MacDonald draws upon the traditional popular association of the north wind with 'cruel' Fate. (Inglow's parallel figure in *Mopsa the Fairy* is called Mother Fate.) North Wind is one of numerous agents of fate/destiny/karma, hence only occasionally are her actions significant for Diamond. For the purposes of the story, however, she symbolises all karma. It is necessary in a story of this kind that a natural force like a wind be personified. Thus MacDonald follows the principle which the fairy grandmother enunciates in *Phantastes* of representing anything associated with the spiritual side of human nature as feminine. Knoepfmacher declines to take this on board, so interprets all female figures in MacDonald's works in sexual terms and any other symbol for the spirit, such as water, as 'an emblem of femininity' (e.g.141). His approach becomes unpleasant where he suggests that 'Diamond nurses his infant brother and sister as an expression of his unfulfilled desire for North Wind's comforting breast' (266). It is considerably more unpleasant where he depicts Diamond's relationship with North Wind as 'erotic' (246, 255, and 266). MacDonald was perhaps unwise to re-employ return-to-the-womb symbolism which he had used more appropriately in his adult romance *Phantastes*, but he could never have anticipated the extreme reductionism of post-modernist criticism. In *Phantastes*, Anodos puts on a symbolic garment of purity to make this passage, but MacDonald clearly felt that with a young boy and a symbolic figure colder than ice no such precaution was necessary. One wonders how Knoepfmacher would interpret the advice given to Vane in *Lilith* that he must pass through himself. Child-readers fortunately do not see North Wind in this light. They recognise that Diamond is full of love for everything good, not least North Wind, whom they tend to see as a loveable but searingly eccentric 'aunt' figure. Like Diamond, they identify Diamond's mother as the mother-figure of the story.

Knoepfmacher has one serious misreading where he conflates MacDonald's two very important, but very different, essays "The Imagination . ." and "The Fantastic Imagination" in *A Dish of Orts* (148-49). Most of his textual misreadings, however, are minor ones in themselves, such as

any critic will make from time to time, but they are often employed to draw faulty conclusions. An example is where he concludes that where all the babies start crying in "The Light Princess" it is because they are reflecting MacDonald's old obsession and are 'deprived of maternal milk' (141), whereas the text suggests they are frightened because they can no longer cry tears.

Knoepflmacher accepts the conclusions of various previous critics where the attribute to premature weaning MacDonald's undeniably desperate need for a maternal female figure. Knoepflmacher is convinced that premature weaning induced life-long traumas in 'many Victorian males' (17), yet considers Victorian females were unaffected (33). He perceives the effects in MacDonald's writings in even more unlikely places than those where earlier critics have seen them. For example, of his list of five 'larger-than-life female forms in MacDonald's own fictions' (130): 'the "tall gracious lady" who directs Anodos back to Fairy land' merely changes from 'tiny' to human size; 'the "mighty woman with a face / As calm as life," who waits for the dying protagonist in "A Hidden Life"' is only mentioned in six lines which are far from crucial to the long poem; 'the huge maiden in the illustration for "The Portent"' only appears unusually large because she is on a narrow ledge on a mountain-side and the illustrator realises it would be ridiculous if he depicted her at the conventional distance of some six feet as this would imply that he himself was floating in space: and 'the sky-bound North Wind who is so enormous that Diamond can nestle in her hair' is just as often a tiny thing no bigger than a bumble-bee (as in MacDonald's chapters 5, 9 and 11), although when she is transporting Diamond she of course has to be a strong wind so he usually sees her a a large figure. Similar tendentious lists occur elsewhere, for example in the sentence: 'Like Diamond, Mossy, and Curdie, the trusting boy-questors of the later tales, Anodos can venture into Fairy land only by submitting to the powers of a maternal mentoria' (121).

Knoepflmacher throughout relies heavily upon the use of tendentious words and phrases. In part, as in the second example above, this stems from his wish to pretend that Christian metaphor or mythopoeia in a story is little more than sexual wishfulfilment. In some places he, even dismisses more or less overt expressions of Christian principles as sexual inadequacy (lack of machismo). Freud's hypothesis that most art arises from deflected sexual urges is a truism well understood for many centuries (although often forgotten). But the corollary is false that it would be better if authors were able to function as 'more balanced' people-even though it is in conformity with the premises of postmodernist deconstructionism and accepted as 'politically correct.' Knoepflmacher's need to justify his approach leads him to distort much in the later chapters of *At the Back of the North Wind* where he cannot accept Diamond's switch of priorities from the earthly to the spiritual world upon becoming subconsciously aware that his death is imminent. This despite the fact that Diamond supports his whole family as a cab driver (a sufficiently macho occupation to secure grudging approval from Knoepflmacher) and continues this task as long as is necessary. (He would have continued until he dropped dead if a kindly providence had not intervened.) Knoepflmacher's treatment of Diamond's death as 'escapism' (e.g. 303) is particularly tendentious seeing how very common child-deaths were in Victorian times, in literature and in life.

With Carroll's *Alice* books, most critics still believe that his Christian metaphor and mythopoeia is intended as little more than whimsy. This may be why Knoepflmacher, in analysing these books, felt he did not need to display the relative caution he shows in his approach to *At the Back*

of the North Wind. His two chapters on these books accordingly contain few new insights. By contrast, his chapters on the three female writers, emphasising their 'didactic and empirical' approach (xi), are fascinating and informative, even though marred by repeated denigration of Ruskin and Carroll. His study of the interaction between the text of Rossetti's *Sing-Song* and Arthur Hughes' illustrations to the poems is particularly fascinating and important. Knoepfmacher shows how Ewing's 'grasp of a folkloric tradition based upon female transmission . . . allowed her to revitalize the didactic texts of the earlier Enlightenment women who wrote for children' (xii). Her approach was eagerly taken up by MacDonald, who in *The Wise Woman* borrows from several of her stories.

Knoepfmacher does not mention *The Wise Woman*. He does, however, note the way Carroll draws upon Rossetti's *Goblin Market* at the end of *Wonderland* in order that his story can close by emphasising the importance of female transmission of spiritual wisdom. This is directly contrary to Knoepfmacher's picture of Carroll elsewhere in the book and in fact he unobtrusively undermines his other principal rhetorical arguments by similar carefully reasoned statements. This suggests that he is not altogether happy that his approach has to be so excessively dictated by current fashion.

The book is well-produced and contains few typos. The absence of a collected bibliography is inconvenient, as is the use of page references to out-of-print editions of MacDonald's works instead of to the readily available Johannesen edition. Another curious bibliographic detail is the listing of the old address for Penguin Books as Hammondsworth, Indiana.

Adapted, with permission, from an article in *The Lewis Carroll Review*.

Ian Blakemore's George MacDonald catalogue

This 46 page catalogue was described in *Orts* 55. Its importance as a supplement to existing bibliographies of MacDonald's works needs to be emphasised. Many of the editions described in Ian's catalogue are not mentioned in Raphael Shaberman's biography. Most of MacDonald's books were so popular that a surprising number of editions were published, making a bibliographer's work very difficult. But in addition to this Shaberman chose a cut-off date well before the year of publication of his bibliography and omitted not a few earlier twentieth-century editions simply because he did not personally like them.

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Address for correspondence and *Orts* contributions:
John Docherty
9 Medway Drive, FOREST ROW, RH18 5NU, U.K.
Tel. & Fax: [0] 1 342 82 3859

Society web site: www.george-macdonald.com

E-mail enquiry service: gmsociety@bigfoot.com

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Address for contributions to *North Wind*:
Dr David Robb, Dept. of English, University of Dundee
DUNDEE DD1 4HN
Fax: [0]1382 34 5503 e-mail: d.s.robb@dundee.ac.uk

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North American Representatives:
Randall and Emily Tobias
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Tel. 919 479 4902 e-mail ctobias@mindspring.com