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The George MacDonald Society

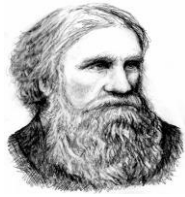
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Orts

The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 58, October 2000

AGM 2000

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held at Swedenborg House, 20-21 Bloomsbury Way, London WCI at 7 for 7.30 pm. on Friday October 20th. Swedenborg House is just a few minutes walk from Holborn Underground Station, towards the British Museum.

After the business meeting the Revd John Pridmore, Vicar of Hackney, will speak on MacDonald's mentors, with particular reference to A.J. Scott. John has twice previously addressed the Society at its AGM and his talks are very popular.

LORD RUNCIE

It was with deep regret that we learned of the death earlier this year of Lord Runcie, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. He was a good friend to the MacDonald Society, able to penetrate to the essential core of MacDonald's thought. This was no innate gift. It came as a consequence of his profound researches into the essential spiritual nature of the Christian faith.

NEW EDITOR FOR ORTS

When I agreed in the Spring of 1997 to bring out the Society's newsletter on a temporary basis I never anticipated that I would have to publish no less than 16 issues! Ian Blakemore is now able to take over this task. His addresses are on the back cover. Please support him with your contributions. As a former editor with Paternoster Press he possesses the experience to create an entertaining and informative publication to compliment the Society's journal *North Wind*, which should now appear regularly again, as in every year up to 1997. The irregular appearance of *North Wind* over the past four years necessitated *Orts* temporarily becoming a hybrid, part-way between a newsletter and a journal. Hopefully this situation will not recur. 'Hybrid' pieces which appeared during this period that are possibly of some permanent value will be listed in a complete index of non-ephemeral matter in *Orts* to be published in *North Wind*.

Ian hopes to produce a more ambitious newsletter than has appeared up to the present time. This should attract more members and thus ultimately become self-funding. But funding will have to be found for the extra cost of the first few issues in the expanded form. Help with this new venture, by donations and/or by recruiting new members, would be a great help to the Society at this stage in its development.

John Docherty

FUTURE MEETINGS & WORKSHOPS

This workshop, announced in *Orts* 52, has had to be postponed. Erica Ferrari, who was organising it for us, has been taken seriously ill and is likely to remain confined to hospital. Also, the castle where the workshop was to have taken place has suffered from yet another earthquake! In the long run the new damage is likely to be advantageous as the Italian government has realised that measures to strengthen-as well as simply to repair-the structure of the castle must be undertaken promptly. But the workshop is now unlikely to take place before 2002 at the earliest and may be moved to Bordighera and modified into a combined Conference and Workshop. The Workshop part would still study the Italian episodes at the beginning of *Within and Without* and *A Rough Shaking*.

Boston area 2001

There will be a workshop over the first weekend in May extending the study of *The Wise Woman* begun at the last N. American workshop in 1999 and also looking at *Gutta Percha Willie*. This story is conveniently published in the same volume as *The Wise Woman* in the Johannesen edition and its theme is much closer to that of *The Wise Woman* than might be anticipated at a first glance. If you wish to receive full details as soon as they become available please contact Nancy Mellon 82 Gage Rd, WILTON, NH 03086.

Hastings 2001

There will be a one-day meeting, with the option of a second day, in Hastings in the early autumn. MacDonald wrote two of his most important books at Hastings: *Phantastes* and much of *The Princess and the Goblin*. Somewhat surprisingly, the topography of Castle Hill, Hastings seems likely to have inspired the topography of the castle mountain in *The Princess and the Goblin*. Hastings is of course the place where Lewis Carroll and MacDonald had their crucial first meetings and the Carroll connections will also be explored.

Another event being planned is a visit to MacDonald sites in East London, including the chapel where he was married, led by John Pridmore.

Talks on MacDonald can usually be given on request to church groups, local literary societies and the like in SE England and sometimes in other parts of the country also.

WHOLE-DAY MEETING AT BEDFORD

Given the importance of Bunyan as an influence upon MacDonald, the key role of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the lives of the MacDonalds, the ease of access to Bedford for English people and visitors and the splendid facilities now provided at the Bunyan Meeting Free Church, the following account by Alan Stott of the Society's Bedford Meeting needs no apology. Bunyan helped MacDonald to perceive the spiritual reality underlying everyday experiences. Following in his footsteps we too can perceive this. The changes in the landscape since Bunyan's time are no barrier.

On September 9th old friends and new met at the Bunyan Centre at Bedford to learn something more of the connection of George MacDonald and his family with The Tinker of Bedford. The Bunyan Meeting Free Church is a fine mid-nineteenth century church in the traditional nonconformist style on the site purchased by Bunyan in 1672 to give his congregation a permanent meeting place. We walked through the beautiful old graveyard of the church, flanked by the house which John Howard the penal reformer built in the eighteenth century so that he could attend the church every Sunday. Then a huge photograph of Louisa MacDonald with the Beulah tapestries the family painted behind her showed us that we had reached the place where the first part of the meeting was to take place: the Howarden Hall, one of the meeting-rooms of the church recently transformed into a splendid lecture room.

After coffee-and animated conversation-Richard Lines warmly introduced everyone and thanked the organisers. As readers know, MacDonald took part (mainly in the role of Greatheart) in family productions of a dramatised *Pilgrim's Progress* Pt.2. We heard from Rachel Johnson that these well-organised amateur productions were a regular feature from 1877-1889. Visiting friends occasionally helped out when some member of the family was ill or away. Rachel brought with her one of the curtains used as part of the backdrop, painted and embroidered by the children. The acting experience was so strong that the family members even began to assume the roles they played. The influence of their performances was considerable. Their unpretentious production paved the way for the modern revival of the mediaeval Mystery and Miracle plays. General Gordon was moved to present George MacDonald with a suit of chain mail that once belonged to a Spanish Crusader! The play of a spiritual journey was no unexpected choice, for, as Rachel suggested, all MacDonald's works can be seen to relate in some way or other to the theme of a 'spiritual journey.' At the same time, the play was a crucial source of extra income to pay for the family's winters in Italy, essential to the health of several of them.

John Farquharson, the water-colour painter, gave some delicious family anecdotes, being a great-grandson of George MacDonald. It is quite impossible to convey the delicious way he characterised the late Victorian values of that mixed bunch, the extended family! Helped by some pictures and memorabilia, we caught lasting glimpses of the people immediately surrounding the great man.

Aidan Mackay, the Chesterton expert who lives locally, contributed an introduction to the main events of Bunyan's life and to the local places which he used as settings for events in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and which we were to see in the afternoon.

We were then shown round the fine new Bunyan Museum attached to the church where we saw the copies of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in nearly 200 different languages, pictures from Chinese and African versions, Bunyan's vestry stool, his violin made from sheet iron, his anvil, and lots more. Another devoted guide showed us over the Free Church, with its remarkable bronze doors and the eight fine, romantic stained glass windows which it has gradually acquired, their colours brilliant in the strong sunlight, each depicting a scene from the famous allegory that really qualifies for the status of myth. Here was the original of the postcard portraying Bunyan in prison that was the only item of mail to reach Terry Waite during his captivity in the '80s as a hostage.

After an excellent lunch, also at the Free Church, Aidan Mackay led the afternoon coach trip. We first visited the village of Elstow with its Abbey, the village where Bunyan was born. We saw the Moot Hall standing in the Green that was the scene of so many fairs-the origin of 'Vanity Fair.'



and which he came later to deplore, seem on the whole, Aidan suggested, somewhat mild to us today! The coach then took us up Ampthill ('ant hill') where the unseasonably hot weather (with even the flying ants out and about) made it easy for us to imagine the young Bunyan, loaded with very heavy tinkers' gear, struggling up the slope (the 'Hill Difficulty') to Houghton House,



which must certainly have impressed the future writer and provided the origin of the 'House Beautiful.' The 'Delectable Mountains' were of course there for us to see too. And looking back we could see on one side of the straight way by which we had come the great extent of the 'Slough of Despond,' now largely flooded.



As we heard of the struggles and victories of the past, and the place of art in the midst of those struggles of living, I wondered how our new century will turn out. The outer struggles continue in the world and still they all boil down to inner thresholds and our willingness, or not, to cross them-the supreme theme of spiritualising our lives and becoming thereby more human. Will art continue its phoenix-like renewal amidst the threatening forms materialism assumes? And will the pilgrim on the spiritual journey still find his or her way? I was encouraged by one detail not mentioned by the guide. Each window in the Free Church, above the stained glass, included a decorative shell-motif. This badge of the mediaeval pilgrim could be an ecumenical and an inter-cultural motif today. Poor Ophelia sang:

How shall I your true love know
From another one
By his cockle hat and staff,
And his sandal shoon.

Alan Stott