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The letters of George MacDonald compiled by Glenn Sadler reveal many insights into MacDonald's personality. For example, in a letter to his future wife he writes:

I was preaching last Sunday about forgiveness and I felt that not to forgive was just to send one to the hell of our little universe. Not to be forgiven and taken in by any human heart is the worst mishap that can befall. May I be taught a lesson hard to learn. You do not need it so deeply as I do—you only break out in thunder and lightning! I have a cold smile deep in my heart like a moth-eaten hole when I feel really wronged.

Perhaps it was this perceived character weakness which much later led him to write in *The Diary of an Old Soul*:

Keep me from wrath, let it seem ever so right:
My wrath will never work Thy righteousness.
Up, up the hill, to the whiter than snow-shine,
Help me to climb, and dwell in pardon's light.
I must be pure as Thou, or ever less
Than Thy design of me—Therefore incline
My heart to take men's wrongs as Thou tak'st mine.

It is comforting to those of us who have been convicted by his preaching in his novels to know that he was preaching to himself as well. In commenting on his novels in an 1879 letter he wrote:

I try . . . to make them true to the real and not the spoilt humanity. Why should I spend my labour on what one can have too much of without any labour? I will try to show what we might be, must be, shall be—and something of the struggle to gain it.

The letters clearly show MacDonald's struggles with poverty, ill health, and death. In his lifetime, two brothers died as young men, four of his eleven children died, and three years before his own death, his wife of 51 years died. These events certainly affected his faith, his happiness and his writings. He is honest about his

doubts: “How do I know that my faith is of the lasting kind such as will produce fruits? I am ever so forgetful and unwilling to pray and read God’s word.” In an 1847 letter to his father he wrote: **[end of page 51]**

One of my greatest difficulties in consenting to think of religion was that I thought I should have to give up my beautiful thoughts and my love for the things God has made. But I find that the happiness springing from all things not in themselves sinful is much increased by religion. God is the God of the Beautiful, and Religion the love of the Beautiful, and Heaven the house of the Beautiful—nature is tenfold brighter in the sun of righteousness, and my love of nature is more intense since I became a Christian, if indeed I am one. God has not given me such thoughts and forbidden me to enjoy them. Will he not *in them* enable me to raise, the voice of praise.

In a letter to John Ruskin:

Now we are all but Psyches half awake, who see the universe in great measure only by reflection from the dull coffin-lid over us. But I hope, I hope. I hope infinitely. And ever the longer I live and try to live, and think, and long to live perfectly, I see the scheme of things grow more orderly and more intelligible, and am more convinced that all is on the way to be well with a wellness to which there was no other road than just this whereon we are walking.

In another letter he states succinctly a major theme in his writings concerning obedience and belief:

You cannot have such proof of the existence of God or the truth of the Gospel story as you can have of a proposition in Euclid or a chemical experiment. But a man who will order his way by the word of the Master shall partake of his peace, and shall have a growing conviction that in him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

He wrote many letters to people who were grieving because of the death of a loved one. A typical comment was:

As to death itself that is not in any sense an evil, for it is not the thing it looks to the eye that looks on. I can well imagine the freed one exclaiming, “is this what they call death.”

It is said that he often remarked to friends, “I wish we were all dead.” This was not a morbid remark but was based upon his faith that what appears as death to us is really a birth into a new and better life. His view of this life and the the life to come is perhaps best expressed by the following, written in 1894: **[52]**

This life is a lovely school time, but I never was content with it. I look for better—oh, so far better! I think we do not yet know the joy of mere existence. To exist is to be a child of God; and to know it, to feel it, is to rejoice evermore.

In spite of this faith, when death came to his children, it did affect him greatly, and a few years before his death, and after a stroke which left him difficult of speech, his wife describes him as:

still but sadly—not always and I believe rarely is the sadness deep down in his heart . . . still it is only by a few words here and there and by the lovely smile and the pressure of the hand that we see the peace behind all the disturbance of nerves.

In another letter to his father in 1851, before he was 27 years old, he expresses his general view of the Christian doctrine which was a constant theme of later novels:

I firmly believe people have hitherto been a great deal too much taken up about doctrine and far too little about practice. The word “doctrine” as used in the Bible, means *teaching of duty*, not *theory*—I preached a sermon about this. We are far too anxious to be definite, and have finished, well polished, sharp edged systems—forgetting that the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it is to be wrong, the more impossible it is to be right. I am neither Armenian nor Calvinist—to no system could I subscribe.

It was probably sermons like the one referred to here that caused him to lose his pastorate at Arundel, the only one he ever held. As a teacher I can’t resist including one quote from the young preacher at Arundel in a letter to his father: “O for a few that really wanted to learn.”

In 1872-73, MacDonald went to the United States for a lecture tour, as he said, “to get something out of America in return for the books of mine they have pirated there to a much greater extent than at home.” Because there were no international copyright laws then, his books were published in America without paying him anything. His wife Louisa and his son Greville accompanied him on this trip. Although his lectures were well received, the MacDonalds suffered from the different culture, weather, and especially the different times and types of meals. Fortunately, Sadler includes in this collection of letters some of the letters Louisa and Greville sent back to the rest of the family in England, in which they describe quite well and sometimes humorously some of these differences. **[53]**

The book is quite well organised by Sadler into six time periods with a helpful introduction to each period, including significant dates and events. The

only weakness, and that a very minor one, is the index. It is not as complete as it might be and lists the American poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, as James Whittier. Another nice feature of this book is a family tree compiled by Freda Levson (née Troup). It starts several generations before George MacDonald and includes his grandchildren. It also contains the best collection of photographs of his children that I have seen. A personal note by Christopher MacDonald and a Foreward by G.B. Tennyson add to the value of the book.

Overall, Professor Sadler has done an excellent job. This long awaited publication of MacDonald's letters is a tremendous source of information about his life, family, friends and yes, an expression of his character. **[54]**