

1-1-1995

## The Strengths and Weaknesses of Robert Falconer

Peter Butter

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

---

### Recommended Citation

Butter, Peter (1995) "The Strengths and Weaknesses of Robert Falconer," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 14 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol14/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact [sarah.titus@snc.edu](mailto:sarah.titus@snc.edu).

## The Strengths and Weaknesses of *Robert Falconer*

Peter Butter

“Daily life, sir; that’s what suits us; daily English life,”<sup>1</sup> said a publisher to the young Trollope. At a similar stage in his career George MacDonald was advised by his publisher that “nothing but fiction pays,” and turned from poetry (*Within and Without* 1855, *Poems* 1857) and fantasy (*Phantastes* 1858) to realistic fiction. But, though rightly concerned to provide for his large family, he would not compromise his duty to use literature as a vehicle for his teaching and his visionary imagination. The bent of Trollope’s genius was well suited to show “the way we live now”; but MacDonald wanted to make his novels:

true to the real and not to the spoilt humanity . . . I will try to show what we might be, may be, must be, shall be—and something of the struggle to gain it.<sup>2</sup>

Is this conception of the ‘real’ fully expressible in the “realistic” novel? By looking at parts of *Robert Falconer* I shall try to find how successfully MacDonald combined in his novels the teacher, the visionary and the popular novelist.

*Robert Falconer* was not published in book form until 1868, after the closely related *David Elginbrod* (1863) and *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865); but its origins go back earlier. Not long after the advice to turn to fiction (c.1860) MacDonald wrote *Seekers and Finders*, a novel partly based upon an earlier failure, a play “If I Had a Father,” written by 1859. *Seekers and Finders* failed to find a publisher, was abandoned and later destroyed—but not before it had been read by Greville MacDonald, who wrote:

Robert Falconer first appears here . . . he stands for the prophet who primarily has vision of the truth always supreme to its concrete expression, while his antithesis, Aurelio, a young, imaginative sculptor, finds in Beauty the manifestation of all Truth and so seeks to idealize Form without any further concept of what Truth means.

The book “reveals, too, the writer’s intimacy with disreputable London.”<sup>3</sup> So we already have the finding of the father (in very different form from later), Robert Falconer as sage, and disreputable London. The mature Falconer appears also in the third part of *David Elginbrod*, where the author says that

**[end of page 57]** he will not relate particulars of Hugh Sutherland's walk with Falconer through some of the most wretched parts; of London because he has already "attempted to tell a great deal about Robert Falconer and his pursuits elsewhere."<sup>4</sup> This suggests that he then still hoped to get "Seekers and Finders" published. His preoccupation with the character, who, according to Greville, "remained his . . . type of what a man might be,"<sup>5</sup> is shown also in his naming his son born in 1862 after him. By 1866, having achieved success by using his Scottish experiences in two novels, he had decided to give his prophet a whole history by returning to his own childhood in Huntly and youth in Aberdeen. On a visit to Huntly in summer 1866 he "got good for my book," he wrote to his wife, by renewing his memories. Indeed he perhaps got too much, for the book was to give offence in the area by incorporating recognisable people and actual incidents. Nevertheless, the great superiority of the first two Parts on the young Falconer over the third Part on the middle-aged sage is largely due to their being more solidly based. Both the young and the mature Falconer are idealised self-portraits. The first rings true—the experiences come across as real, even if selective; the second portrait is in some degree sentimental, a wish-fulfilment dream; and there is not enough done to make a bridge between the two. MacDonald would probably have liked to be a man of action, a saviour in the London streets revered by police and poor, but he was able to be so only in a minor degree. So his dream figure is unconvincing, comes through as smug and sometimes tedious, though he has interesting things to say.

*Robert Falconer* was serialized in the monthly *Argosy* from December 1866 to November 1867, and with considerable variations published in three volumes in 1868. It begins as a successful "realistic" novel. The background for the twelve-year-old Robert is clearly sketched—the house in which he lives with his mother and the small town of Rothieden. The detail is well-chosen, and is felt as significant without its meaning being too much stressed—the boy's preference, quite natural in itself, for a garret with a skylight (when first mentioned, covered with snow) over a more comfortable room looking into the street, an as-yet-unregarded door leading into the next house, the austerity, yet comfort, of the house with a warm fire at its heart. These and other details will gather meaning. Neither the life in the house nor in the town is sentimentalized. "Rothie" is defined in the *Concise Scots Dictionary* as tumult, muddle or "a rude, coarse person"; "den" is primarily a narrow valley, but can also mean a lair, place of refuge. Rothieden is a place without much **[58]** humane culture, dominated by narrow views

especially on religion. Within it Robert will find access to larger life through his spiritual aspirations, suggested by the upward-facing skylight and the kite he will fly through it; through the door to the neighbouring house where he will find sympathy and culture; through music, which at the beginning he already hears from the street. In Rothieden these doors will be obstructed, and he will need to escape from the narrow place; but his home is also in some degree a refuge—both for him and for Shargar, the abandoned boy whom he rescues. Doubleness is seen in the name of the town; in “Dooble Sanny,” both fine musician and drunkard; and above all in MacDonald’s most fully created character, Robert’s grandmother Mrs Falconer. She is a completely believable individual as well as being representative of a Scottish type. The balance is well maintained between recognition of the distortions resulting from her narrow religious beliefs and her partly repressed kindness and warmth of heart. But it is too simple to say that she is a fine woman spoilt by false religion; for there is something proud and hard in her corresponding to the religion she has accepted. When introducing her MacDonald shows his ability to describe appearance and character tersely: she was observing her grandson with a “keen look of stem benevolence”; her upper lip “capable of expressing a world of dignified offence, rose over a well-formed mourn, revealing more moral than temperamental sweetness,” (I ch.6) Throughout the book he will reveal her through what she does and says without, in the main, the excessive commentary which so often spoils his portrayals.

Robert’s position in the home having been established he is sent out into the town to the inn, where he encounters a group of loungers interested in the arrival by coach of a beautiful lady. Later we are introduced to an informal club of more socially-notable citizens which meets in the inn. Both loungers and club members speak in quite vivid Scots, as do Robert himself and his grandmother. At this point we may think that this is going to be a regional novel like some of Trollope’s, George Eliot’s and Hardy’s in which a group of rustics at the pub or of more middle-class characters at a club (see Trollope’s *The American Senator*) or other assembly acts as a kind of chorus. Such devices help to create a background against which the doings of the central characters can be seen in perspective. If we are led to expect anything like this of *Robert Falconer* we are disappointed. After the first few chapters the Falconer household is curiously isolated. They presumably go to church, but little is said about this. Robert goes to school, but [59]

did not care for . . . games . . . and had therefore few in any sense his companions. So he passed his time out of school in

the company of his grandmother and Shargar, except that spent in the garret, and the few hours a week occupied by the [violin] lessons of the shoemaker. (I ch. 14)

Later he forms relationships with Mary St John and with Eric Ericson, outsiders, and with the Laramie family at a farm outside the town; but there is little sense of interaction with the surrounding community. This is to be not a story of provincial life, but a bildungsroman, the story of the growth of a boy to maturity, centered on his inner life. Is Robert a sufficiently credible and sufficiently interesting character to fill this central role? Richard Reis says that “The MacDonald Hero is simple—simply a bore,” and compares Robert adversely to Alec in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*. Alec, with in some ways a similar history to Robert’s, is a prankster in childhood and falls into vice in adolescence; but Robert:

is merely a saint. He is incapable of backsliding, even for a moment; and he even seems immune to the ordinary temptations and lusts which trouble us sinners.<sup>6</sup>

It is not quite true that Robert is from the beginning “merely a saint.” There is some “pride and a sense of propriety . . . some amount of show-off” (I ch.7) in his patronage of Shargar, some deceit in his concealing things from his grandmother. If he is to our eyes an excessively “sober boy,” that is partly due to his temperament and partly to the “saving harshness” of his grandmother’s upbringing:

keeping from him every enjoyment of life which the narrowest theories as to the rule and will of God could set down as worldly—Her commonest injunction was, “Noo be douce”—that is sober—uttered to the soberest boy she could ever have known. (I ch.10)

Robert and his grandmother are alike in some less attractive features as well as in inner warmth and large-heartedness. MacDonald can do more ordinary, more mischievous boys such as Alec Forbes and Ranald Bannerman, and here deliberately does something different—a boy who is the product of a particular upbringing, being prepared for a special role. Nevertheless one must agree that, looked at from the outside, he is “less credible and human than Alec,” less attractive than MacDonald’s other saintly boy, Sir Gibbie, who is saved by a touch of the bizarre; but when the narrator takes us inside him, his experiences are made wholly convincing—his efforts to accept the [60] religion he has been taught; his final inability to believe in his grandmother’s God; his search for meaning, ultimately for God, through

music and nature:

He lay gazing up into the depth of the sky, rendered deeper and bluer by the masses of white cloud that hung almost motionless below it, until he felt a kind of bodily fear lest he should fall off the face of the round earth into the abyss . . . . [T]he humanity of the world smote his heart; the great sky towered up above him, and its divinity entered his soul; a strange longing after something “he knew not nor could name” awoke within him, followed by the pang of a sudden fear that there was no such thing as that which he sought, that it was all a fancy of his own spirit. (I ch.18)

In Part I of *Robert Falconer* MacDonald combines the ordinary skills of the novelist with his poetic and prophetic concerns. In Part II there are fewer striking descriptions of places and incidents to act as correlatives for the large themes and Robert’s inner life. His life at university contains few memorable events, and his religious struggles are conveyed more by talk with his friend Ericson than in any intensely realized experiences of his own. Ericson is said to be based upon MacDonald’s brother John, and is brought in presumably to allow more fundamental questionings than those of the sober Robert to be examined. As always in MacDonald there is profound thought and spiritual insight, but these are less movingly conveyed than in Robert’s encounters with his grandmother.

Aware of the need for more action MacDonald brings in a rather feeble sub-plot—the attempted seduction of the insipid Mysie by a cardboard aristocratic villain. The most interesting products of this are visits to the wilder shores of MacDonald’s imagination. At Mysie’s home Eric, supposedly in love with her, tells two very strange stories—of a young man and a witch and of a young man and a wolf-girl. Here MacDonald the fantasist, preoccupied as in *Lilith* with woman as threat, for a moment nudges aside the sage and moralist. The other striking incident is when Robert sets all the bells of Antwerp Cathedral ringing in a glorious, burst of sound:

Often had Robert dreamed that he was the galvanic centre of a thunder-cloud of harmony, flashing off from every finger the willed lightning tone . . . . The music, like a fountain bursting upwards, drew him up and bore him aloft. From the resounding cone of bells overhead he no longer heard their tones proceed, **[61]** but saw level-winged forms of light speeding off with a message to the nations. (II ch. 23)

This seems fantastic, but is based upon MacDonald's own ascent of Antwerp Cathedral tower and listening to the bells at night. "I believe they were only ringing the bells to please God or drive away the devil."<sup>77</sup> (Robert's ringing thwarts the devilish aristocrat.) Through Robert, MacDonald indulges a fantasy of prophetic power.

The Mysie story is incidental, though enhanced by these strange passages. More central to the plot is the Robert-Mary St John-Ericson story. Woman, sometimes the witch or werewolf, is more usually for MacDonald the Angel in the House—as is Mary St John, almost literally so in two appearances. She cannot quite be dismissed as the conventional Victorian heroine. Older than the two young men who love her, she has authority, her name combining suggestions of Virgin-mother and Evangelist. She is seen from the outside, and we need not complain of knowing little of her inner life. In her first scene with the boy Robert (I ch. 17)—which shifts quite delicately between shyness, misunderstanding, almost offence, tenderness—MacDonald shows that he could have developed the relationship in an ordinary human way. As it is he uses her for the purposes of the plot rather than creating her into an interesting character in her own right. She educates Robert; by attracting his shy and distant love she exempts the author from having to say more about his adolescent sensuality; and by coming to love Eric she gives Robert the shock which ends his youth.

Robert's youth ends with the death of Ericson and the realisation of Mary's inaccessibility. In his grief and still suffering from religious doubt he thinks only of getting away. "Travel, motion, ever on, ever away was the sole impulse in his heart" (III ch. 1). Like many another distressed Victorian hero he wanders aimlessly abroad for two years. We can accept this evasion of his problems as pardonable weakness; but not the evasiveness of the author, who writes:

I cannot, if I would, follow him on his travels . . . . What the precise nature of his misery was I shall not even attempt to conjecture. That would be to intrude within the holy place of a human heart. (III ch. 1)

An author has no business not to know about his creation's doings or the state of his heart. The author is here taking refuge behind a narrator, distinct from himself. During the first two Parts we have come across some slight indications of a distinct narrator, but nearly all the time we have assumed that [62] we were listening to an omniscient author, who sometimes enters into Robert's mind and mostly; describes, from the outside but with

limitless knowledge, the characters and events. Now in Part III the narrator emerges from the shadows, and is eventually identified as Archie Gordon, a young man who becomes a friend and disciple of Robert's and is to take over his work. He has no distinct character nor point of view, opens no fresh perspective. He merely provides the author with an excuse for not fully creating the mature Robert as he has the boy and the youth. Robert is seen from the outside; his experience of the London streets and of the characters met there are not made real for us. He has a confidant to explain his ideas to, and these are interesting; but they are not realized in fictional terms through incidents, living characters, relationships. The stories seem contrived to illustrate a thesis. (The narrator is much less prominent in the *Argosy* version, which is without chapters 8, 10, 16, 17, 19 and 20 of Part III. *Argosy* has a strong ending with the death of Mrs Falconer. Neither *Argosy* nor the first edition has chapter 21. The many minor amendments to *Argosy* are often improvements, but the large additions to Part III and the added mediocre poems in Part II are not.) Part III is not well integrated into the first two parts, and is inferior to them; but it contains much of interest. The conclusion to the search for the father has been long foreseen by the reader, who wonders only how it is to be done—and it is quite well done, the father's reluctance and continued weakness of character to the end being realistically depicted. Unlike in most such stories, the son learns nothing of value to himself. He becomes the father in relation to his own father, the father a prodigal son in relation to his own son, just one of the stray souls whom the redeemer brings back to the fold. The story is related to what is perhaps the central theme of all MacDonald's work—the Father God's endless loving care for all his children, if necessary by the use of pain. There is no Hell, only purgatory; the refining fire will bring all to perfection. The mature Robert, refined by his own early sufferings, can be a helper to the Father in the task of redemption. It is a noble theme, but difficult to embody in a novel without making the redeemer appear pompous and self-satisfied.

Part III allies *Robert Falconer* with the many other “condition of England question” novels of the time. It is a common complaint against the middle-class authors of such novels that, having vividly depicted the social evils, they evade suggesting any sufficient remedies, not really wanting any radical change. MacDonald may be criticized along these lines, but not, I think, quite for evasiveness; for he does confront the issue and robustly state [63] a clear point of view, preferring trust in God and individual charity to action by institutions. Falconer was convinced that:



whatever good he sought to do . . . must be effected entirely by individual influence. He had little faith in societies, regarding them chiefly as a wretched substitute, just better than nothing, for that help which the neighbour is to give to his neighbour . . . . [O]nly the personal communion of friendship could make it possible for [the poor] to believe in God . . . . Money he saw to be worse than useless, except as a gracious outcome of human feelings and brotherly love. (III. ch 7)

The intention is to show these opinions in action as well as to state them; but MacDonald's language and scope of imagination are not fully sufficient for the task.

Looking back we remember a work which is always arresting and intermittently inspiring. The best parts are those which are most securely based on the author's own experience. The attempts to create realistic scenes, incidents, characters from imagination are not so successful. Here and there are signs of the strange and powerful imagination which created the fantasies. The deep humanity and spiritual insight make it more valuable than many more coherent works.

#### Notes

1. Anthony Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, ch. 1.
2. Letter to Lord Mount-Temple, 13 Jan 1879, quoted in William Raeper, *George MacDonald* p 194.
3. Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, pp 319-20.
4. *David Elginbrod*, III ch.7.
5. *George MacDonald and His Wife*, p, 321.
6. Richard Reis, *George MacDonald's Fiction*, p 66.
7. Letters to Mrs MacDonald, summer 1865, quoted in Glenn Sadler's edition of MacDonald's letters, *An Expression of Character*. **[64]**