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## George MacDonald as Poet and Actor

Ernest Rhys

[Ernest Rhys, mining engineer and literary gossip columnist, became the editor of the Everyman's Library of world classics. The 900 plus titles included *Sir Gibbie* and *Phantastes*. This extract comes from his autobiography.]

Some day I should like to write a book on forgotten or half-forgotten poets, and Roden Noel would be one. Another, more original, more imaginative, was his near contemporary, George MacDonald, who, like him, looked the poet: if a mixture of a Highland chief and an old Druid fits the frame.

There are noble moments in George MacDonald's poetry, and at times, the true lyric ring:

Why do the houses stand  
When they that built them are gone;  
When remaineth even of one  
That lived there and loved and planned  
Not a face, not an eye, not a hand,  
Why do the houses stand  
When those who built them are gone?

Possibly a line has dropped out? There are imaginative verses too in his remarkable little book, *The Diary of an Old Soul*, such as that beginning, "There stood a child before an empty house," which ought to be safe under memory's seal. The diarist, the Old Soul himself, was one of the four or five most impressive, most convincingly self-impersonating figures among all the poets I have known.

The first impression I gained of him came, curiously, when he was dressed in complete armour, waiting to take part in a Mystery Play founded on *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I had sent him a batch of verses when mining in the North, and in reply he invited me to see the play at the town of Sunderland. Thither I found my way one October night with some difficulty. On reaching the musty little theatre where the play was to be given, I was shown along a dark under-stage passage to a small green-room. As the door opened it disclosed under a single gas-jet a stately gleaming apparition—

George MacDonald, attired in full armour for the part of Greatheart. He sat reading a book before a small fire, his legs crossed. No doubt, as actor and stage manager in one, he was used to interruptions, for he went on reading a moment or so before he turned his head. (The book, I noticed, was a French yellow-back, possibly a Balzac novel?) When he stood up in his steel accoutrements he looked majestic; his head touched the low ceiling: and I thought of Scott's Master of Ravenswood. **[end of page 44]**

A rickety chair gave me a seat opposite him; he talked of the play, spoke indulgently of my verses, and asked if I would rather see the play from the front or from the wings?

"You can be a scene-shifter if you like. We do everything ourselves: make the dresses, paint the scenery, write the play with John Bunyan's help, and act it, like a company of old interlude players."

As he spoke a bell rang, and he led the way to the stage, stooping his lofty head under the low door.

From what I saw of the play, and of the acting—the actors and actresses, his sons and daughters, the strangeness of the stage, and this imposing, pacing Greatheart—the play seemed artistically so simple and complete, that it gave on new ideas of what folk-plays might be, with a minimum of trappings, mechanical device and stage-craft.

After the play, we supped well and I slept on a sofa; for this troupe of players had a very haphazard *menage*, and their and their master player had evidently a poet's contempt for any routine, or any pedantic division between night and day. **[end of page 45]**