

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Sadler, Glenn Edward (1997) "George MacDonald on Pain and Suffering: An Unpublished Letter to Alexander Munro," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 16 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol16/iss1/4>

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George MacDonald on Pain and Suffering: An Unpublished Letter to Alexander Munro

Glenn Edward Sadler

As a man and a writer George MacDonald was no stranger to physical suffering and pain. One of MacDonald's best statements on "pain" and its redemptive role in the Christian's life appears in his sermon, "The Creation in Christ." This passage, quoted by C. S. Lewis in his *Anthology*, suggests that for MacDonald pain had a significant part to play in one's final joy and bliss. Thus he wrote: "The working out of this our salvation must be pain, and the handling of it down to them that are below must ever be in pain; but the eternal form of the will of God in and for us, is intensity of bliss."

It is an interesting fact that while MacDonald was suffering most himself, he was often, at the same time, offering words of comfort and solace to his friends. Although throughout his life MacDonald was rarely without some form of physical pain, his trip in 1869 on *The Blue Bell* to Norway must have been one of his most devastating experiences. After returning from an exhausting trip to Scotland in January, 1869, where "he spoke during five weeks twenty-eight times, and never in the same town," MacDonald greatly needed a time of revitalization and recuperation. Unfortunately his trip to Norway was only more suffering. On board *The Blue Bell*, MacDonald wrote to his wife at three in the morning (June, 1869): "Oh these dreary nights of pain and sleeplessness. I have not slept half an hour since one o'clock. And I don't sleep much in the day either, though the day is better than the night. We have been since Saturday morning crossing the North Sea, which has been wonderfully quiet—a good thing for my poor leg, though indeed the motion is not very irksome." **[end of page 25]**

In a moving letter (July 22, 1869) to Mrs. A. S. MacColl, Mrs. MacDonald describes graphically her husband's extreme suffering—"pain, pain, couldn't eat—could scarcely read, no woman near to attend him—not one face he had ever seen before about him— . . . And oh! dear Mrs. MacColl, I shall never forget what I saw on arriving at the platform. There was an invalid carriage and in it a man propped up with pillows looking as if he were in the last stage of consumption with a horrid cough. I could scarcely believe it was George. His eyes were sunken, his cheeks hollow, and

he was so weak that his voice, as hollow as his cheeks, could not speak three words together from weakness . . . He said wherever they carried him people looked at him so—he looked like a hero coming from the wars, and ‘alas!’ he said, ‘I had done nothing for anybody.’” Following this statement, Louisa MacDonald adds a very significant comment: “But he had suffered intensely, and who shall say those sufferings were not for other people—in what he may hereafter write.”

Shortly after returning in July (1869) to The Retreat, London, MacDonald did indeed write a letter of consolation to one of his dearest friends, Alexander Munro, who was battling the pain of cancer. MacDonald and Munro had met in the mid-1850s during the time MacDonald was giving readings in London—perhaps at St. Peter’s, Vere Street, where F D. Maurice was later appointed minister. Through his friendship with the sculptor Munro MacDonald met Arthur Hughes, who shared a studio with Munro. Munro’s sister Annie, who was godmother to MacDonald’s son Robert (Bob) Falconer and who with MacDonald believed in second sight, was like a daughter to the MacDonald family.

On July 14, 1869, from The Retreat, MacDonald wrote:

My very dear Munro,

I almost envy you who have already left so much of the path of suffering behind you. God be with you & help you in what remains. I think you have had to bear so much just to let you know that God was with you. I think I have learned to trust him a little, but I am always need- **[26]** ing fresh lessons. I hope before very long, I shall trust him altogether. Dear Friend, trust in him who must love you better than you love your little children. He will be with you in your pain, & you will be able to bear it. I think he has been with me in my pain, and never let it go beyond what I was able to bear. He knows all about it, and he would not be a perfect God if his sympathy were not perfect. I live in the hope of a blessed time beyond death, when the gifts that made life a good thing here will have fresh opportunities & means of growth, & men will praise the Lord for his goodness. How glad we shall be when it is over, & we are born again unto the second state of our being. I do not believe that death is so dreadful as it looks. God gives grace to die as to live with patience and victory. Our Lord Christ knows all about it, & will take us through tenderly as our father or

mother would. My dear love to you. God be with you & yours. Accept my warm thanks for the gifts you have given me—the boy with the dolphin especially. Annie has given me a little sketch of yours—the bad angel with the little child. It is a powerful idea but one is sure he will not be able to keep the child. No, nor shall the great Satan keep one child that God has made. The mightier will claim his own.

Again I pray God be with you. He will not let you suffer more than is needful. May he help you through—triumphantly, & give you eternal health. I have seen your dear Annie today. She is pretty well.

Ever in life or in death
Your loving friend,
GEORGE MACDONALD

My wife desires me to give her dear love to you & say you are much in our thoughts.

Note

I should like to thank Katherine Macdonald for providing me with a copy of this letter and kindly giving me additional notes. According to Mrs. Macdonald, *The Bad Angel and the Child* was probably never done “in a more permanent medium: marble or bronze”; *The Boy and the Dolphin*, however, remains today for all to see it—now returned to its original site at Hyde Park corner. [27]