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**Slusser, Dale Wayne. *In the Near Loss of Everything: George MacDonald's Son in America*. Wayne, PA: Zossima Press, 2009. 147 pages.**

**John Pennington**

**S**lusser's book is an odd, yet useful book for George MacDonald readers. *Odd*, in that the book is not about George. Rather, *In the Near Loss of Everything* is about his son, Ronald, and his wife, Louise (Virenda Blandy), who moved to America in 1889 to begin tutoring male students in Asheville, North Carolina. *Useful*, for as Slusser writes in the Preface, "die-hard George MacDonald fans will find material that will enhance their understanding of the beloved author, whose writings were very much a product of the myriad of divine crucibles which touched his family and life" (6).

The book is comprised of 13 chapters; a chart of significant dates about Ronald and Louise's relationship; a bibliography; a series of appendix materials that includes letters, abstracts of Ronald's dramatic plays, abstracts of his novels, "The Laughing Elf" (an original fairy tale), and, finally, his essay on his father that appeared in *From a Northern Window* (1911). The reprinting of "The Laughing Elf" is particularly interesting, for it attests to the "fairy tale" influence that George had on his son and demonstrates the genius George had for writing in the fantastic vein—while "The Laughing Elf" is a serviceable tale, it lacks the originality of his father's great fairy tales and fantasies.

The central focus of the book is on Ronald's relationship with his wife Louise, who died at Ravenscroft High School for Boys in Asheville on August 27, 1890. The title of the book comes from Ronald's *The Carcase* (1909): "In the near loss of everything but our spiritual relation we may know, perhaps, and touch each other with an intimacy never yet attained . . . ." Thus the book is simultaneously a "history" and a reflection on loss that mirrors the work of C. S. Lewis: in our grief observed we can find hope and salvation. The time period of the book (1889-94) includes Ronald and Louise's courtship in England, their marriage and move to America, Ronald and Louise's roles at Ravenscroft, Louise's death, Ronald's handling of that loss, and his return to England and eventual marriage to Constance Robertson in 1897. I found especially interesting that Louise, an artist, grew up knowing John Ruskin; in fact, Lousie's father was Ruskin's dentist. As you will see, each chapter is chock-full of such interesting details about the MacDonalds

and about the educational life of boys in America during the late nineteenth century.

Any review, one might argue, should quibble a bit here and there over certain issues. My only real quibble concerns Slusser's use of Wikipedia as a research source. One example: in chapter 8 Slusser quotes a letter from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, where Ronald writes to his father, about the death of Louise, that "it seems only a woof of desolation & warp of pain. I would oh, so gladly die any minute, but with God's help & yours & Loo's last words I am slowly, very slowly, learning to live, I think." Slusser provides a note on the meaning of *woof* and *warp* from Wikipedia, which jars with the archival research that he does to illuminate the letter. Why not to use the *Oxford English Dictionary*? There are other instances when the detailed research Slusser uncovers is somewhat undercut by his use of nonacademic research sources (such as Wikipedia). Finally, the book needs an index, which would be useful to readers.

In the Epilogue Slusser concludes: "Ronald's seven year sojourn in America is a story that needed to be told, as it was not only largely untold before now, but it is the type of seemingly isolated story that really combines with other stories to make up the fabric of 'history'" (82). That history provided by Slusser may lead to more investigation into George's touring of America beyond that reported in Greville's *George MacDonald and His Wife* and William Raeper's *George MacDonald*. For example, was Ronald aware that Ruskin utopian communities were developing in Tennessee and, later, in Georgia and Florida? George is purported to have met Francis Hodgson Burnett, of *The Secret Garden* fame, when he was conducting readings in America: did George influence Burnett? Slusser's work may pave the way for more scholarship that contributes to the fabric of history that defines the study of George MacDonald.