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George MacDonald and Celtic Christianity

Melody Green

In *Listening to the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, J. Philip Newell presents the writings of George MacDonald as a "new channel of expression" for an "ancient stream of spirituality"(60). This ancient form of faith that Newell identifies in MacDonald's work is a type of Christianity that is said to have developed early in the British Isles, and was largely uninfluenced by what was happening in the rest of Europe. Thus "Celtic Christianity" maintained, and continues to maintain, a unique richness of experience and belief. Newell explains how MacDonald's fiction, primarily *The Princess and the Goblin*, reflects several aspects of Celtic Christian thought: the presence of God in all things, the importance of the imagination in relating to God, the Pelagian (as opposed to Augstinian) belief that sin is not inherent in humans but something we each choose, and a more fluid understanding of God's identity in terms of gender (59-60).

Newell was one of a large number of writers in the 1990's who engaged what they saw as a revival of Celtic Christianity. One of the catalysts for this revival was Ian Bradley's *The Celtic Way*, first published in 1993. In this book, Bradley enthusiastically introduces his readers to ideas he saw as at work in the lives and practices of Irish monks and saints from the fifth century, and he argues that these were passed on down through the ages in the British Isles. This included not only the concepts listed above, but also an awareness of the presence of God in nature, the spirituality involved in pilgrimage, and the importance of Christian community as developed in the lives of Irish monks. Newell presents MacDonald as a part of this Celtic tradition, surfacing like a breath of fresh air during a time when a harsh Calvinism was the primary form of Christianity at work in Scotland.

Newell is not the only one who presents MacDonald's work in such terms. In *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald*, Kerry Dearborn argues that MacDonald's theology was largely shaped by the tension that existed between his grandmother's rigid Scottish Calvinism and the flexible Celtic culture around him. She describes a conflict between "Calvinist and Celtic thought" that created a "faith crisis" out of which MacDonald's own peculiar theology was born (9-10). Dearborn claims that a "sacramental" approach to the world which "honors truth from a

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variety of cultures" that she sees in MacDonald's work is an aspect of Celtic Christianity (10). She presents MacDonald's father as embracing egalitarianism because he was a Celtic Christian, and thus influencing his son (14). Other evidence that MacDonald was "Celtic" relies in more secular attitudes, such as his love of the clan system and of poetry (15). She goes on to point out that pilgrimage, an important aspect of Celtic Christianity, is a common theme in MacDonald's work, especially his fiction. She then lists what she calls a "sacramental vision," as well as "feminine characteristics of the divine, the value of beauty and the arts, the importance of the Trinity, the dignity and worth of the stranger, the significance of community, and a love of God's creation" as aspects of Celtic Christianity that influenced MacDonald and can be found in his work (16). Dearborn ends this section of the book by declaring that MacDonald's theology is in many ways new, but is also "anchored in the earliest Christian traditions and revelations" (24).

Dearborn offers a priceless addition to MacDonald studies, but fails to do two things: first, she never explains what makes these elements in MacDonald's work specifically Celtic. Many branches of Christianity involve these; several of them could even be said to be visibly present in the teaching of Jesus. The other issue present is that Dearborn uncritically accepts the idea that everything currently accepted as Celtic Christianity has always been a part of it from its beginnings.

Unfortunately, this is not as simple as it looks. Six years after the publication of *The Celtic Way*, Bradley argues in *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Dreaming Dreams* that "Celtic Christianity is less an actual phenomenon defined in historical and geographical terms than an artificial construct created out of wishful thinking, romantic nostalgia and the projection of all kinds of dreams" (vii). In this book he postulates that there have been six distinct revivals of Celtic Christianity throughout history. Each one reflects not the original ideas of Patrick, Aidan, Columba, and other early Irish saints, but the interests and desires of the particular era in which the revival occurred. For example, a twelfth century revival embraced the uniqueness of Celtic forms of belief as a response to the Norman conquest, and as a way of holding onto the culture of the past. A revival that occurred during the Reformation presented the beliefs and practices of ancient monks and saints as a prototype of a form of British Christianity separate from the Catholic church. The Victorian revival, as Bradley presents it, was shaped by nationalism, and by growing differences between denominations. The *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of Gaelic poems, prayers and songs compiled

in the late Victorian era and prized by the contemporary Celtic movement, is to Bradley nothing more than one of many resources attempting to establish a unique, national identity near the heart of a vast empire. Intriguingly, Bradley never mentions MacDonald as a part of the Victorian revival he outlines. In the twentieth century Bradley observes two separate revivals, one focused on the island of Iona and the rebuilding of the ancient monastery there, and the second focusing on balancing the concerns of the late twentieth century: environmentalism, materialism, and self-focused attitudes and behaviors.

Bradley is not the only person to question the origins and validity of the movement he himself helped to reinvigorate. In "Myths of Celtic Christianity," Gavin Wakefield argues that the stories of ancient saints, pilgrimages and monasteries from ancient Ireland are being retold not to revitalize the past, but to legitimize a certain set of contemporary concepts by claiming that they have been a part of Christianity for a very long time. The two aspects of this contemporary movement that Wakefield focuses on are the presence of God in nature, and the importance of the feminine. Wakefield argues that both of these are simply postmodern responses to certain aspects of modernism, and are not present in previous forms of Christian thought. Since the concept of Celtic Christianty is trendy, Wakefield posits, these other contemporary trends have become a part of it (204-205).

Another article that throws doubt on the historicity and veracity of the Celtic Christian movement is "A Place of Community: 'Celtic' Iona and Institutional Religion." In this article, Rosemary Powers argues that much of the twentieth century Celtic revival grew out of the ideas of George MacLeod, who founded the Iona community in 1938. St. Columba had founded a monastery on the Island of Iona in sixth century, which was replaced by a Benedictine Abbey during the middle ages. The Abbey lost its prestige after the reformation, but a couple of hundred years later, people touring the Island reported a sense of holiness and a desire to worship while visiting the ruins. In 1899 the monastic lands were deeded to the Church of Scotland with the understanding that church services could be held there for any denomination, and in 1938 MacLeod began his new community who worked on rebuilding the Abbey as well as living what they saw as a monastic lifestyle. Powers argues that the constant references to "Celtic Christianity" that occur in the early newsletters written by and for the community existed more to deflect any outside criticism than to consciously develop a unique flavor. Powers goes on to declare of MacLeod that "Many of the apparently Celtic references have been provided from

his own imagination to fill the gaps left by historical knowledge" (41). She later claims that in MacLeod's mind, "the Celtic element was something to be invoked in order to enable him to do what he felt needed" (42-43). As Powers goes on to describe various elements of Christianity as presented at Iona, she attempts to show that anything thought to be ancient that can be associated with the community is not Celtic, but has other origins—they are either directly borrowed from other Christian traditions or simply made up.

One of the concepts embedded in contemporary Celtic Christianity that comes out of Iona is the idea of "thin places," or places where the division between this world and the next is particularly fragile. Iona is, according to MacLeod, one such place. Powers makes the claim that the idea of places where the supernatural world is so close was invented by MacLeod, but it "may have originated from the writer George MacDonald" (45).

In other words, while declaring that most of what is currently believed to be Celtic Christianity was invented by one person in the first half of the twentieth century, Powers, like Dearborn and Newell, recognizes a connection between it and a writer from the nineteenth century. While she does not declare a direct influence, the implications of this simple statement are important. The more similarities between MacDonald's writings and Celtic Christianity that exist, the higher the likelihood that MacDonald either influenced a twentieth century movement called "Celtic Christianity," was influenced by an ancient movement by the same name, or both. In other words, MacDonald's writing may be evidence that Celtic Christianity as it is known today is not simply a twentieth-century invention, but is part of something older and richer. After all, Newell claims that MacDonald was a part of this ancient movement that has been passed down through the ages. It is also possible, however, that instead of simply being a part of something much older than himself, MacDonald has had a much heavier influence on a twentieth-century movement than has previously been acknowledged. Before either claim can be fleshed out, however, a closer examination of the similarities between the contemporary idea known as Celtic Christianity and the writings of George MacDonald needs to occur.

While a study of the complete body of MacDonald's work would be fruitful for such a task, it is not necessary. Strong "Celtic" elements can be found in three of MacDonald's fantasy stories: *Phantastes, Lilith,* and "The Golden Key." Each tells a story about a pilgrimage across a thin veil into an alternate world in which the main characters experience adventures that ultimately lead them through spiritual growth into maturity and an acceptance

of death.

Phantastes begins with a young man named Anodos meeting his grandmother, who just happens to be a fairy. Like many grandmothers in MacDonald's work, she is more than simply a relation—she is in some mysterious way connected to the divine. As the person who first introduces him to the idea that there is more to be known than simply the material world, she plays a similar role to the Grandmother in *The Princess and the Goblin*. Newell points out that the Grandmother's divine-like qualities reflect a Celtic willingness to allow more freedom in defining the gender of God (61-62; 71-73). Anodos's grandmother has promised that he will enter fairy-country the very next day. As his bedroom turns into a forest glade with a stream running through it, Anodos realizes that his bedroom is the thin place.

Mr. Vane in *Lilith* has a similar experience. Like Anodos, he is a young man who has inherited a large house and estate. Along with the house, he has inherited a librarian. A sexton. A raven. Or in reality this odd person is Adam, the ancestor of all of the human race, who uses Mr. Vane's home in his wandering between worlds because it is a convenient thin place. Due to Adam's influence, Mr. Vane also has more than one journey through the veil and across worlds. The land he finds himself in is described as "the region of the seven dimensions," and basic rules of science like time and mass do not work the same here as they do at home (21). Weirdly enough, in some way he does not understand that while in this region, Mr. Vane is also still in his home. The Raven/librarian/ancestor of all humankind takes pains to make this clear to him. The spiritual nature of this other world is identified not only in the discussions the Raven has with Mr. Vane of spiritual matters, but also in the simple fact that this is where Adam and Eve, who are long gone from the material world, live and work.

In "The Golden Key," Mossy and Tangle both live close to the border of fairyland. In fact, they do not live in the material world as we know it, but in the thin place between it and fairyland. Because of the thin nature of their homes, neither Tangle nor Mossy realize when they set out at first that they have entered fairyland. Like Anodos and Mr. Vane, Tangle and Mossy pass through a thin place into a land where they began personal pilgrimages, or journeys of spiritual growth.

Pilgrimages are not just common in MacDonald's fantasy stories, but they are also another element that defines Celtic Christianity. In *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Victor Turner describes the traditional pilgrimage as an ancient practice, common in many religious traditions,

in which the individual chooses to engage in an "exteriorized mysticism" through traveling to a "far holy place approved by all" (7). That is to say, the pilgrim typically sets out on a journey to a specific place in order to achieve a specific, concrete goal. The journey is commonly viewed as something that will increase the spirituality of the person who succeeds, and arrival at a destination that is somehow connected with the spiritual is a vital part of this process. Within a Celtic context, however, pilgrimage takes on a different significance. In *Colonies of Heaven*, Ian Bradley explains that the pilgrimage had both a literal and a symbolic place in the Celtic mind. Celtic pilgrims, called "peregrini," do not set out with a specific location in mind. Instead, the Celtic pilgrim left the places that were known to him, and set off into the wild—often, but not always, in a boat. The pilgrim's plan consisted entirely of "trusting yourself entirely to God" (Turner 204). The journey itself is what matters in this type of pilgrimage, and it is undertaken in order to increase the wayfarer's understanding of and reliance upon God. The journey itself is far more important than the destination.

The protagonists of *Phantastes, Lilith*, and "The Golden Key" undertake journeys they never intended to go on, in order to learn things they did not know they needed to learn. The destination is far less important than the journey itself. A common complaint against each of these three stories is that they appear to be meandering and unfocused, but that is exactly the point. Their journeys are less like Christian's in *A Pilgrim's Progress*, who followed a clear-cut path to the Heavenly City, and more like the Celtic St. Brendan, who, along with several other monks, set out in a boat and had a wide range of unusual but spiritually-developing adventures from mistaking a whale for an Island to meeting Judas himself.

At the first place he stops on his journey into fairyland, Anodos admits that he has no idea where he is going, and is told that "no one comes here except for some reason, either known to himself or to those who have charge of him" (15). He sets off with the plan of taking whatever adventure may find him. Mr. Vane travels back and forth between this world and the one on the other side of the veil several times, but his real journey begins when he enters fairyland of his own volition with the purpose of repenting. He finds that apologizing to Adam changes nothing, so he is no longer under the protection of the librarian. He cannot return home at this point, so he sets off into this alternate world. His description of his own state of being at this point is this: "My heart was sore, and in my brain was neither quest nor purpose, hope nor desire" (46). Tangle ends up in fairyland because she is

running away from frightening things in her home, with no thought of where she is running to. Mossy is the only one who has any idea of a goal. Living in the land between the two worlds, Mossy was able to find the key that lay at the end of the rainbow. He set off into fairyland looking for the door that the key fit. For Mossy, the pilgrimage becomes not only important, but it becomes his entire life.

After crossing through a thin place, Mr. Vane, Anodos, and Mossy and Tangle each set out on a pilgrimage which enhances their spiritual vision and their understanding of not only themselves, but of the world around them. For Anodos, this new vision is wrapped in an understanding that he has been given rules not because someone wants him to be unhappy, but for his basic survival. The first person Anodos meets in fairyland is a young woman who gives him a quick nature lesson. "'Trust the Oak," she says, "and the Elm, and the great Beech. Take care of the Birch, for though she is honest, she is too young not to be changeable. But shun the Ash and the Alder for the Ash is an ogre . . . and the Alder will smother you with her web of hair, if you let her near you at night" (11). While one could point out that the sentient nature of plants in MacDonald's fairyland could reflect the Celtic Christian interest in nature, the roles that these trees play in Anodos's adventure is more important. It is the trees and his relationships to them and with them at the beginning of his journey that shape what he needs to learn and gain through the rest of it.

Mr. Vane, on the other hand, must learn to accept his death. He is young and it seems like a strange thing to require of him, but until he accepts it, he cannot live. When he first visits Adam's house, Eve offers to let him sleep there. But because she cannot tell him when he would wake up again, he refuses the offer. Later, Mr. Vane attempts to return in order to apologize and asks to be allowed to rest there now. Adam does not allow this, and when Mr. Vane asks the way back home, he is told that Adam cannot tell him this because "we are often unable to tell people what they *need* to know because they *want* to know something else" (45). Mr. Vane's sacramental journey focuses on learning what he needs to know so that eventually he, like many others who are afraid, can face his own death. Only when he has learned to love others and sacrifice himself for them, does he find himself in his own home, ready to face the rest of his life.

Mossy and Tangle also set off on pilgrimages that provide spiritual growth. Mossy must find the lock that the golden key fits, and Tangle's grandmother, whose house they both arrive at after entering fairyland, sends

her with him because “no girl need be afraid to go with a youth that has the golden key” (33). On their journey Tangle and Mossy are separated and have distinct adventures, but after each grows in the way needed, they meet up again “and were as happy as man and woman could be. For they were younger and better, and stronger and wiser than they had ever been before” (74). Both have tasted death, and it has made life sweeter for them.

In *Colonies of Heaven*, Bradley describes the death blessings that some who practice contemporary Celtic Christianity embrace. The idea is that these prayers and blessings help the dying person embrace their own death and prepare them to face it. Being prepared to face death is presented in this book as an aspect of Celtic Christianity. This is also an important part of these three stories. In fact, each of these stories closely connects death to another aspect of Celtic Christianity that has not yet been discussed here.

In *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, Newell claims that the elevation of the feminine leads to “an essential goodness of the sexual,” and that when viewed through a lens shaped by Celtic Christianity, “our sexual energies reflect, in their goodness, God’s yearnings for intimacy, creative expression and new life” (72). *Phantastes, Lilith,* and “The Golden Key” are all three stories that involve the goodness of sexuality. Mossy and Tangle’s adventures make them partners worthy of each other, after they have passed through death. Anodos breaks a heart, has dangerous adventures with members of the opposite gender, then has his own heart broken. He learns that there can be both honor and shame in the way one relates to those of the opposite sex. After he discovers that the woman he loves has married someone else, he wanders as in a dream to a crypt, where he begs “if any of the dead are moving here, let them take pity on me, for I alas! Am still alive; and let some dead woman comfort me” (142). Immediately after this he feels a kiss, and he thinks “the veil between, though very dark, is very thin” (142). Like Mr. Vane in *Lilith*, he learns to accept death, but his acceptance of death is closely linked to his sexuality. Later, after he breathes “the clear mountain air of the land of Death,” and is consciously aware that he has died, he makes an important realization: “I knew now that it is by loving, and not by being loved, that one can come nearest the soul of another; yea, that, where two love, it is the loving of each other, not the being beloved by each other, that originates and perfects and assures their blessedness” (180-181).

In each of these cases, their death is really a death to self, which makes their relationships with the opposite gender richer and more blessed. *Lilith* explores this theme in a different manner. As Mr. Vane slowly but

sweetly falls in love with Lona, their relationship is set in sharp contrast against the selfishness and hatred of Lilith, who left her husband to be with the Shadow. For Lilith, forgiveness and the ability to make things right again can only be found in death. She must confront her ex-husband and accept his wife's offer to sleep with the dead who are protected in their house. But Adam is not asking her to do anything that he himself has not already done: the dead sleep there, and then rise again into a new and glorious life. Mr. Vane and Lona do the same, but when he wakes up in his library, she is no longer with him.

Mossy and Tangle's pilgrimage does not end where their story does. Instead, having finally learned what door the key fits, they find the door, enter it, and continue together on their journey to a land from which beautiful shadows came. There is another world, they learn, on the other side of fairyland, a world more real than anything they have yet encountered. Anodos and Mr. Vane, on the other hand, having gained what was needed from their own pilgrimages, both return to their homes. Anodos begins the duties of the owner of a large house with land, and he explains that "I began the duties of my new position, somewhat instructed, I hoped, by the adventures that had befallen me in fairyland. Could I translate the experience of my travels there, into common life?" (184) For Anodos, the adventure was about gaining the skills needed to face the rest of life. And just as contemporary Celtic Christianity embraces the idea of good in nature, in the individual, and in all things, he ends his story by declaring "I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it" (185). While Mossy, Tangle, and Anodos end their adventures in the simple belief that what is coming is better than what has already been, Mr. Vane's story ends with a tinge of sorrow mixed in with the hope. He explains that he has never seen Lona since his homecoming, but Mara, the daughter of Adam and Eve who embraces and teaches sorrow, has often been his companion. He questions whether he is still asleep in Adam's house simply dreaming the world he has returned to, or whether this world is the reality, and the other just a dream. If this world is the reality and his adventures only a dream, he muses: "Could God Himself create such lovely things as I have dreamed?" (251). Hope itself answers him, asking him in a Job-like manner who created the trees and the songs, and whether he was the one who created beauty, or if it is someone far beyond him. The answer he gives himself is that "man dreams and desires; God broods and wills and quickens. When a man dreams his own dream,

he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfill it" (251). Mr. Vane experiences hope, but a hope tinged with sadness and doubt.

Here in this concept of beauty stands another place where contemporary Celtic Christianity and these three stories are closely related. Newell and Bradley's early work on Celtic Christianity embrace beauty and link it closely with Nature. The beauty in nature, they argue, draws one closer to God. Bradley problematizes the issue, however, in the article "How Green Was Celtic Christianity?" He declares that while proponents of Celtic Christianity believe that the early Irish saints—Patrick, Columba, and others of their ilk—loved nature and saw it as a place where God was particularly present, Bradley argues that they were actually ambivalent about nature and often found it rather hostile (58). Because they lived in it constantly, the monks and saints of early Ireland and Scotland did not necessarily think of "nature" as an entity of its own, nor, he argues, did they show any evidence of loving it more than any other form of Christianity (62). According to Bradley, this high view of nature came not from these ancient sources, but from a twentieth century desire to legitimize a new form of Christianity that is more ecologically friendly than in the past. While it is highly likely that Bradley is correct about the ancient monks, this love of nature and beauty, and the idea that nature is a special place where God can be particularly close, underlies all of MacDonald's writings. The world on the other side of the veil in all three books is a land of heartbreakingly beautiful forests and glens, and it is in this setting that each of his main characters are able to learn and grow closer to God, and closer to each other. While others have pointed out that this shows a strong influence of German and British Romanticism on MacDonald's work, it may be worth wondering if it is not at least partially through MacDonald that Celtic Christianity received this love of nature.

And this may be what it all comes down to. If Powers, Wakefield, and Bradley are correct and that Celtic Christianity as it is defined today is merely, or at least primarily, an invention of the twentieth century, one must wonder where this invention came from. Powers suggests that at least part of it may come directly from the writings of George MacDonald. The fact that both Newell and Dearborn embrace the idea that MacDonald was a Celtic Christian does not weaken Powers's idea; instead, it strengthens it by showing some connections between a nineteenth-century writer and a twentieth century movement. If Bradley and those who agree with him are simply being too harsh and Celtic Christianity is truly a movement that has

been, in some way passed down through the ages, then Newell and Dearborn are correct—and MacDonald is clearly one of the people influenced by this ancient form of thought. If, however, it is a fairly recent invention made of the hopes and dreams of people looking for an escape from a materialistic, selfish consumer society, then a question must be raised regarding MacDonald's role in shaping this worldview. It may well be that MacDonald has had a much larger, if rather subtle, influence on a twentieth-century movement than has previously been thought.

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