My Personal Debt to George MacDonald

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When I sat down and began to think, how did I know about George MacDonald?—I assume it must have been through C. S. Lewis, but I have no proof of it. Certainly I was first introduced to him through the *Unspoken Sermons* and then, subsequently, through the *Diary of an Old Soul*. I am no expert at all in the tales of fantasy and imagination; so it is about the theology of George MacDonald that I want to speak—not in a technical sense, but simply because the theology of George MacDonald has always chimed in with my own preconceptions. He is not, of course, an academic theologian—as he describes them in his *Unspoken Sermons*, “spinning his cobwebs in the dark.” That does describe some of the activities which MacDonald rightly attributed to the theologians of his day. He was not “spinning his cobwebs in the dark,” but he was a man deeply involved in the life of the world, and his theology is inseparable from that world in which he lived.

I want now to say something about those aspects of his life which influenced his theology—what are the characteristics of it. The theology is dominated by experience, first of all in the pastorate. He was born in 1824, he entered King’s College, Aberdeen, in 1840, and in 1850 he began a pastorate at Arundel. And so the story goes, well documented by Greville MacDonald’s biography: he was starved out by the deacons for his so-called heterodox opinions. He was tainted, they said, with German theology, which was always a dangerous thing to be in those days; and he had the audacity to suggest there was some provision for the heathen after death. For those two things he was regarded as unsound in the pulpit of that particular chapel, and they reduced his income from the kingly sum of £120 to £100 a year. That was the difference between life and death from his point of view, and so after a year or so he had to move.

He married in 1851, and then through the efforts of friends in Manchester he acquired what he called “a room of his own” in Manchester. And he valued that so highly because, he said, it was the realisation of a long-cherished wish to have a place of his own to preach in where he would be unshackled in his teaching—and I think, really, that in a way dominates
almost the rest of his theology, he had, as it were, escaped from the dogmatic structures which dominated the Church of his day, and was eager only now to operate outside them.

The second period is the literary period, which I think will be covered more by Dr Prickett later on, but I’ll just mention that he was contemporary with, for example, Froude, Wilkie Collins, Trollope, Thackeray, Macaulay, Morris, Bulwer Lytton, Carlyle and Dickens. It is really rather amazing, this—an extraordinary efflorescence of literary activity in which MacDonald was in one way or another involved. His output, of course, was enormous. I don’t suppose anybody here has the complete works—52 volumes produced in varying editions.

And then the long vigil from 1900 to 1905, in which, you remember, he was “wholly silent.” I think it to be true that the translator of the Living Bible, having done the whole Bible himself into a new translation, actually was himself silent after that for ever. It says something about any kind of huge literary or intellectual effort that it sometimes leaves people just like that. MacDonald’s was, in fact, a life marked by intense literary activity, by recurrent poverty (which was only slightly alleviated by his Civil List pension of £100 a year which was awarded in 1877), frequent changes of home, which is the last thing he wanted because he loved security and a settled home, chronic ill-health, and, of course, typical of a Victorian family, frequent bereavement. I don’t know how many of his children actually reached mature age, but certainly the loss of these children is constantly reflected in the *Diary of an Old Soul*. It is out of this experience of life that his theology springs, and that means that it is real theology. It is not spinning out cobwebs in the dark, it is in fact grappling with the experiences of your own life and trying to find some rationale for them.

There are four things which characterise that theology. The first is *range and freedom*. This is explicit, of course, in his *Unspoken Sermons*, where he is invariably impatient with dogma and reserves his most severe condemnations for the dogmatists and systematic theologians of his day. It is implicit, of course, everywhere in his tales of fantasy and imagination. His theology is a revolt against the hide-bound dogmatic systems of his day, Roman and Calvinist. The interesting part is that towards the end of his life he actually became a lay member of the Church of England, presumably in the belief that the Church of England was innocent of any dogmatic system at all. There is a certain amount of truth in that, but it is interesting that he should ultimately, find himself in the ranks of the Church of England—
although one has to say that he was there probably because of the deep influence which F D Maurice had upon him.

He refused, as someone has said, to label and package men for God. He refused to consider the fate of men simply in dogmatic, institutional terms. I love that remark of Dean Inge; he said “you don’t have to be around very long to know that grace is not distributed on a denominational basis.” Now I take the point of that, and I would have thought that that a point which certainly George MacDonald would have much relished—Grace is not distributed on a denominational basis, nor indeed on a dogmatic basis either.

The second thing about him is the depth. Expectations of life have become so dramatically different today. You expect to live almost for ever, and take it rather amiss if the doctor says you are not going to live for ever. Things are supposed to get better and better, and the ideal condition is to be perfectly happy, with no troubles or anxieties. You couldn’t live in MacDonald’s day with that sort of philosophy of life—it was just not possible. His world was without anaesthetics, with only a rather crude sort of medicine. In his world most children died before they reached the age of 5; there was no provision for senility and nothing really to look forward to.

So he says the world exists for our education. It is the nursery of God’s children—served by “troubled slaves.” Now that’s a very interesting comment: a world served by troubled slaves—whereas it really exists for the education of God’s children. It is the nursery, as he says—a very early stage in the total history of man, which culminates far beyond that terminus which we call death. To believe that, of course, does impart straight away a certain depth to any theology. In his case faith was wrought out of a desperate experience of unhappiness and ill-health and fear. For example, read the exigencies of his own personal and domestic life, on September 12th in the Diary of an Old Soul. Everyone will have had this experience at some time or other:

“Can anything go wrong with me?” I ask—
And the same moment, at a sudden pain,
Stand trembling. Up from the great river’s brim
 Comes a cold breath; the farther bank is dim;
The heaven is black with clouds and coming rain;
High soaring faith is grown a heavy task,
And all is wrong with weary heart and brain.

Some time or other everyone’s going to ask that question, Can anything go wrong with me?—and the answer is, “Yes, it can.” And certainly George
MacDonald plumbed the depths of this kind of fear of what was going to happen to him.

Another quotation is from August 29th, and this I think is marvellous because it so exactly expresses my own experience:

Sometimes it seems pure natural to trust,
And trust right largely, grandly, infinitely,
Daring the splendour of the giver’s part;
At other times, the whole earth is but dust,
The sky is dust, yea, dust the human heart;
Then art thou nowhere, there is no room for thee
In the great dust-heap of eternity.

That’s not a very comfortable verse, but it’s one whose meaning will be clear to everybody who has known the sort of fluctuating faith in their own hearts and lives,—sometimes so pure and natural to trust, and at other times the whole earth is but dust. [6]

The other thing which is reflected, of course, is his intense involvement in social life, especially in the literary life of his day and his response to it. Here again anyone who is involved in public life (as indeed I am) knows what this feels like. I stagger home from the latest confirmation, having attended a bunfight with 200 people and spoken to a lot of people I’ve never met before and will never meet again, trying to remember the names of those I have actually spoken to. And MacDonald says after one of these such experiences, “O Lord,” he says, “I’ve been talking to people”—You don’t need to read any more—”I have been talking to people.” And if then you look on to September 18th, where he does in fact spell out a bit more what he feels, then I think you will see why his theology appeals to me:

Why is it that so often I return
From social converse with a spirit worn,
A lack, a disappointment—even a sting
Of shame, as for some low, unworthy thing?—
Because I have not, careful, first of all,
Set my door open wide, back to the wall,
Ere I at other’s doors did knock and call.

Anyone who’s moved about in a social circle like that for any time of day will know how often one feels like that. Nothing wrong with it, of course—aimless conversation, but destructive in the end if you get too much of it, and certainly I sometimes feel after that sort of thing that I need hours and hours of silent study to recover from it and to find my bearings again. So the
exigencies of his own personal and domestic life gave depth to what he wrote . . . the evanescence of social life.

Then there is the constant proximity of death which runs all the way through the *Diary of an Old Soul*. This one, for example, is on January 27th:

Yestereve, Death came, and knocked at my thin door.
I from my window looked: the thing I saw,
The shape uncouth, I had not seen before.
I was disturbed—with fear, in sooth, not awe;
Whereof ashamed, I instantly did rouse
My will to seek thee—only to fear the more:

Alas! I could not find thee in the house. [7]

Anyone who has feelings, fears and dramatic encounters of that kind is bound to construct a theology or to develop a theology a good deal deeper than the person who sits in a study in a university and simply thinks about it. And this is why I personally find this theology so helpful.

The third characteristic of his theology is what one might call *distance*. You know mountains played a great part in his literature, and they played a great part, I think, in his mental furniture, as when he compared them to God’s church towers—his eye here always looking into the distance. It was the pressure of everyday life, with targets to reach and dates by which, to produce, that gave by way of compensation a certain distance to his forward look. You could say that it was the pressures of everyday life which produced his tales of fantasy and imagination—they are not escape literature, but reality viewed through the fine gauge of his own imagination.

Of course, this also gave weight and prominence to his feeling for and sharing in eternal life—which is not simply something at the end of time, but something in which he shared here and now in accordance with, of course, the teaching of the man he appreciated so much, the great St John, the author of the Fourth Gospel. Here is an example of it in May 6th—I think this must have been written in Manchester really!—

Through all the fog, through all earth’s wintery sighs,
I scent Thy spring, I feel the eternal air,
Warm, soft, and dewy, filled with flowery eyes,
And gentle, murmuring motions everywhere—
Of life in heart, and tree, and brook, and moss;
Thy breath wakes beauty, love, and bliss, and prayer,
And strength to hang with nails upon thy cross.

That is great. It may not be marvellous verse; none of this is marvellous
verse, but it is great theology, where you combine that acute sense of the-world around and then to come, and that world expressed in the natural which he loved so dearly and that was giving him strength to hang with nails upon Christ’s cross. No-one can say that that is not deeply felt and absolutely essential theology for George MacDonald. [8]

I ought perhaps to explain that this book is called in the Bibliography *A Book of Strife*. In a sense that is really what the took is about. It is a book of personal strife, a representation of intense conflict within, submitted to and enhanced by his relationship with God.

The fourth characteristic of his theology is *intimacy*. You might say this is incompatible with his notion of distance, but it is not so in practice. You will have observed, and it is well illustrated in the Lion Publishing edition of *The Fairy Tales of George MacDonald*, his preoccupation with staircases. Now staircases are not like mountains; they are essentially domestic, inward. You go up them, down them, they are in a sense personal and intimate things, not the mountains he describes as God’s church towers. When I describe his intimacy I mean his conversations with God, because the *Diary of an Old Soul* is really a record of conversations with God. The actual life experience does not show through very clearly. You cannot date any of those simply by trying to find associations with his actual practical life. This is a fair old exercise with textual criticism of the Bible. We’re not going to prove it anywhere in this book, so that in a way these are internal, intimate conversations with God, full of rebukes. He doesn’t hesitate to rebuke God, and in that, of course, he is in line with the prophets of the Old Testament, full of doubts, confessions, complaints, hopes. At the heart of his theology was a warm intimacy of prayer. The nearest I know to it in ancient literature is Augustine’s *Confessions*, which similarly contain doubts, confessions, complaints, hopes, rebukes—and there is something very much akin, I think, between the two. But Augustine ultimately—if he did not sacrifice, certainly allowed that particular intimacy with God to yield to the giant doctrinal systems of which he was in part the author. This, of course, was not so of George MacDonald.

His long vigil was, as Greville MacDonald describes it, a constant waiting for something “at hand.” That’s an interesting thing—not waiting for something ahead or afar, but something “at hand.” Greville MacDonald goes on to suggest that this constant waiting for something [9] at hand was for the recovery of his wife, who predeceased him by three years. But I myself have the audacity to doubt really whether that is so. I think it rather echoes that
marvellous phrase in Martin Buber where he describes himself as “waiting, not seeking, we go our way.” George MacDonald’s theology uses on the whole New Testament models when he writes his *Unspoken Sermons*, but nevertheless his theology is thoroughly Hebraic in background. That’s why I think one finds him so much in a sense in alliance with Jeremiah particularly among the prophets. Jeremiah had his own snare of deep troubles and doubts and anxieties and fears, and yet somehow by the grace of God he survived through them. I think that not only towards the end of his life, but all the time, George MacDonald was one of those who was waiting, not seeking—waiting for something to happen, waiting for someone to come and fetch him.

May I end just with a comparison, and that is a comparison between two books called by the same name. They’re both called *The Castle*. One is written by George MacDonald as one of the *Parables*. The other is written by Franz Kafka. Now Kafka’s castle, as you know the story, really is a horrific place. Kafka is sent, to a town as a land surveyor, and he is supposed to receive his instructions, when he gets to the town, from the Castle. He takes lodgings in the town, but no instructions come from the Castle, so he decides he must try and go to the Castle himself. So he sets off and follows roads which appear to lead to the Castle, but they never do actually lead to the Castle: they always veer away, and he never gets there. He writes, but he never gets an answer. In the end two men come to join him, and they say they have come to help him in his land surveying. But they know nothing about land surveying themselves, and they don’t know what he is to survey. So he is accompanied then by two buffoons, as they prove to be, still trying to find out why he’s there and what he’s supposed to be doing. In the end, after a long time, he is awarded an interview, and he is taken to the Castle and falls asleep in the ante-room. End of story. [10] [11] [Note: image not available]

I find that particular story immensely encouraging in a way, because no-one can ever feel quite as bad as Kafka felt. “Another thing about Ecclesiastes,” the vice-principal of Wycliffe used to say occasionally when he thought there were people ready to rise to the bait; “when I feel really depressed I always read the Book of Ecclesiastes.” If you didn’t know him you said, “Really? Why?” He said, “Well, at least I’m not as depressed as that!” I think about the Kafka book, that you could have no more depressing picture of the sense of meaninglessness that dominates twentieth-century society.

Compare that with MacDonald’s Castle. MacDonald’s Castle is a castle built on a mountain, but with its towers reaching up into the clouds,
and with labyrinthine passages and staircases leading down into the heart of the castle set in the rock. It is inhabited by a family who are rather disorderly, but there is an elder brother to whom they always defer, and they are, so it is said, expecting their father to come any time. But they never meet their father. That is almost like Kafka’s tale. There they engage in activities, they play games, they go swimming, they go riding. They don’t know why they’re there, they don’t know what they’re doing, and they don’t know what’s going to happen to them. But the difference is that the whole thing is informed by a warm confidence in the future. And so towards the end of the parable you have heaven and earth joining together like this. And you have a diffuse sense throughout the castle of the coming father, and you have a growing reverence for the elder brother who guides their fortunes. The whole thing is described in similar language, with a wholly different sort of emphasis. You could put it like this: Kafka’s Castle is a forbidding, threatening mystery. MacDonald’s Castle is a loving, promising mystery.¹

Life is a mystery to us all. That is obvious, really, yet twentieth-century rationalist man tries to evade that reality. Life is a mystery to us all. It was a mystery to George MacDonald; for all his knowledge, faith and insight it remained a mystery to him, and one must not suppose that his tales of fantasy and imagination are anything other than an explication of that mystery in his own mind. But it is true, I think, that our attitudes to life and the world will depend on what kind of mystery it is, whether it is a forbidding,

¹. The Castle: A Parable, from The Wise Woman or the Lost Princess (in the series The Fantasy Stories of George MacDonald, Lion Publishing) [12]

threatening mystery, or a loving, promising mystery—and most of us actually oscillate between those two things. All of us, of course, if we were capable, could write a Book of Strife, a Diary of an Old Soul. But whether we write about it or not, we are certainly the arena for the great strife between those who find the mystery hopeful, and those who find the mystery desperate and threatening and despotic. [13]