Preacher & Patriot: George MacDonald as a Scottish Novelist

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“Surely it is one of the worst signs of a man to turn his back upon the rock whence he was born.”

MacDonald was a prolific writer of novels dealing with Christian community life, and various of these novels are set in Scotland and draw strongly on the experiences of his childhood. He is no exception to the rule that writers incorporate a great deal of autobiographical detail and feeling into their works. Unfortunately, his Scottish novels are now comparatively rarely read—or if read, understood, because of what is seen as the impenetrability of the Scots language used in them. However, there are important qualities offered by these books. They offer a realistic reflection of Northern Scottish life and character, MacDonald doing for the North-East what Burns and Scot did for the Lowlands. They evoke nostalgia in any Scot who reads them (and most Scots are very sentimental indeed; witness the kilt-swinging, haggis-addressing Caledonian societies all over the globe, and the tearful singing, as the pubs close, of “Flower o’ Scotland,” a paean to the Scottish defeat of the English at Bannockburn, fought in 1314, but sung about as if it happened yesterday). Most of all in these stories, there is the pleasure, for any native of those parts, to be had in the way MacDonald catches the sounds and idioms of the North-East.

Huntly, where MacDonald was born and brought up, the “little grey town” he describes in Alec Forbes of Howglen, is a small market town beside the Bogie river, some twenty miles or so inland from the Moray Firth. Farmland and hills surround it—keep going south and you are climbing up into the Cairngorms. The colours of the landscape can be dour and gloomy; muted shades of brown, grey and purple, the weather frequently hostile in the extreme, deep snow and howling northern gales. But it can also be extremely beautiful, changing from stern to soft, from gloomy to glowing, with a feeling of bracing openness in the air. MacDonald’s family were enterprising and industrious. His grandmother was a stern Calvinist; she later said: “George cam o’a Godly femly an it’s awfu’ that he should
hae taen to writin novels.” Her doctrine of election and predestination was something MacDonald would later repudiate in favour of a more loving and forgiving concept of God and a hopeful belief of a heaven open to more than the selected Holly-Willie-ish few. As a boy he enjoyed trips to the coast, to the Banffshire villages of Cullen and Portsoy. The preciousness and precariousness of life was ever-present to his eyes: tuberculosis ran in the family, so early deaths—including that of his mother—were common.

MacDonald’s education was by modern standards rigorous and wide-ranging. Scots education has always had a high reputation and families of the poorest stock would make sacrifices to the love of learning. He would have inherited oral folklore and mixed it with the grounding in the classics and mathematics which at school were “the foundations of most children’s education, whether their fees were paid by parents or by the parish. Laird’s son and ploughman’s were on equal footing” (Greville MacDonald). At sixteen he went to Aulton Grammar School, Aberdeen, then from 1840-45 he attended Aberdeen University, having gained a bursary of £14 per annum to cover his fees. His father sent him potatoes and oatmeal on which to subsist, but he had to miss out 1842-43 when grain prices were low and the MacDonaldauls suffered exceptional hardships.

In later life MacDonald made many trips back to Scotland. Greville MacDortald, in his hagiographical biography of his father, tells us in typical overblown style: [26]

Huntly his home and cradle, must ever be to him the land of dreams; and he was Celt enough to realise that his genius must hunger and thirst for its inspirations. One who remembered him on that visit to his home [in 1855] spoke of ‘the tall, delicate, kindly-eyed, Glengarry-bonneted man taking his walks by the castle, or his rides among the heather and dark topaz streams of his native hills.

This, then, is a brief summary of George MacDonald’s early background. What I am now going to do is pick one of the Scottish novels, *Malcolm*, and show how it relates to that background and the important concerns in MacDonald’s work. I have chosen *Malcolm*, rather than *Alec Forbes*, or *David Elginbrod*, which are more autobiographical in many ways, for personal reasons. *Malcolm* was published in 1875, having been written while MacDonald was living at 26 Grant Street, Cullen, a house in which I spent part of my childhood, and the locations he describes in the novel are places was intensely familiar with until I left Cullen in adolescence.
As with so much of MacDonald’s work, the novel has many fairy-tale elements. The main plot derives from the mystery of the eponymous hero’s true identity. Malcolm believes he is a simple fisherman, grandson of the highland piper, Duncan MacPhail. He is a true Wise Innocent, dispensing homely wisdom throughout the book, with pious simplicity and charm. It turns out, and the revelations at the end come as no surprise to the reader, who has been way ahead of the hero on this, that Malcolm is really the son of the local aristocrat, the Marquis of Lossie, who had contracted a misalliance with a social inferior, Griselda Campbell, had gone abroad after a secret marriage, and had been told by his wicked brother that wife and child had died. In later years the Marquis takes Malcolm as his [27] protegê, and Malcolm in turn watches over and grows to love the Marquis’ daughter by a later marriage, Florimel. The book ends with Malcolm sacrificing his patrimony on the death of his father. For Florimel’s sake, he does not declare himself or lay claim to the estate.

Apart from the fairy-tale element of the quest for true identity and the hero’s love (transmuted later into brotherly concern) for the high-born lady of the castle, there is a truly malicious witch-like creature, the “howdy” or midwife, Bawby Catanach. There are also Gothic elements to the book, in that two extra stories are set into the narrative. The tale of the Clouded Sapphires is quite long, describing how a demon in the guise of a man entrances and marries the proud and supercilious daughter of a laird. On the wedding night there is a ghastly shrieking from the bridal chamber and the devil flees through the castle wall, leaving his bride stretched out on the bed, burnt beyond recognition. The Tale of Lord Gernon, the other piece of “Hammer horror” in the book, ties in with imagery of which MacDonald was very fond—the image of a rambling house, with all its compartments, signifying aspects of the human psyche. Lord Gernon enjoys prowling inquisitively, like Bluebeard’s wife, through a house, peering into chambers, following stairs up and down, trying locked doors, descending to the depths, ascending to the heights. A sorcerer, he conducts his mysterious experiments in a chamber above the cellars, and “evil smells” emanate from there, but we are told that he sleeps “in the garret—as far away from his laboratory as the limits of his house would permit.” There he dies; or perhaps not, as his body is never found, and the door to the room is always kept locked. MacDonald has a long authorial digression on the fascination a house presents for him; concluding that: “The cellars are the metaphysics, the garrets the poetry of the house.” [28]
There is a strong class theme in *Malcolm*. The hero’s father, the Marquis, is a cynical sophisticate; generous on a whim, spiteful at times, selfish, and easily bored. Malcolm is to be seen as the Natural Gentleman, brought up by his pseudo-grandfather to have true values in life, values based on heart and spirit, not money and possessions: a love of nature, not ownership of land; fellow-feeling, not exploitation of servants; values which triumph in the end by the sacrifice of the lairdship. The aristocracy does not emerge well: over-breeding, and too easy a way of life make them spoilt, snobbish and self-indulgent. For MacDonald, true gentility arises from the communion of fellow-men, the suffering caused by adversity and the self-discipline needed when wresting a harsh living for oneself in a poverty-stricken world. He praises the intellectual life when it is humble and placed in the service of others, and the life of the man who works honestly with his hands and is not afraid to get them dirty.

Connecting with his children’s books there is the celebration of the innocence of the child, and the frequent commonsensical wisdom a child can display, cutting through the Gordian knot of adult problems. Phemy Mair is a small girl who darts through the book, bright-eyed, loyal and perceptive. There is also the “mad laird,” Stephen Stewart, deranged but sweet, a child’s mind in a tormented adult body, a lost soul whose perennial cry is “I dinna ken whaur I cam frae.” He has been rejected by his mother and finds no peace until he dies, greeting the “father o’ lichts” who offers him a true and permanent home. Finally, there is Malcolm himself, who, through a grown and brawny man, is as innocent as any child, surrounded by the worldly and the cynical.

Religious elements are bound to be strong in any MacDonald novel, and *Malcolm* is no exception. Sermons run through the book like the logo through Brighton rock. Any character, high or low, is given to stints of preachifying, and MacDonald himself frequently intrudes to give us his view. All of this is done with the best of intentions; but in a secular, suspicious era is difficult to stomach. However, MacDonald’s nonconformity comes strongly through. He himself said that he “would rather be of no sect than a sectarian.” In *Malcolm* he criticises both the conventional minister of the parish, Mr Cairns, as a “parrot of the pulpit,” and the evangelical hell-fire preaching held in caves on the seashore. These sermons, or rantings rather, create hysteria and false fervour, and are as bad in their way as the plodding conventionalities of Cairns. “Not a word was there . . . concerning God’s love of fair dealing . . . the preacher’s whole notion of justice was the
punishment of sin, and that punishment was hell, and hell only; so that the whole sermon was about hell from beginning to end—hell appalling, lurid, hopeless.” MacDonald took a positive view of death and salvation, rejecting the Calvinist beliefs of his grandmother. Mr Graham, Malcolm’s mentor, tells him that “morning and not the evening is the season for the place of tombs . . . death itself must be full of splendour.”

For MacDonald, spirituality is a matter for the individual, not the establishment. God and man have a personal intimate relationship. Church institutions lead to bigotry and prejudice. The idealised character of Alexander Graham, the schoolmaster becomes a martyr figure when turned out of his job by the narrow-minded members of the local presbytery, for the sin of thinking for himself and encouraging others to do so. He is disapproved of and eased out for not conforming; an experience with which MacDonald was familiar during his pastorate at Trinity Congregational Church, Arundel.

Now to more specifically Scottish matters in the novel. Scottish history—interwoven skeins of sentiment and vengeance—is evoked through the history of the Marquis’ family, at Lossie House, and at the ancient Colonsay Castle, but most strongly through the character of Duncan MacPhail, the Highland piper, whose father was a fugitive from Culloden—as indeed George MacDonald’s great grandfather had been—and who bears an inveterate hatred for the clan Campbell, responsible for the massacre of his ancestors at Glencoe. So abiding is MacPhail’s grudge that he has great difficulty accepting the revelation that the true mother of Malcolm, his beloved adopted son, is Griselda Campbell.

Location is all-important. Malcolm is firmly anchored in a real place, and the town of Portlossie (Cullen) is populated not just by the idealised or caricatured figures of folklore, but by down-to-earth, graphically realised Scotspeople. MacDonald gives a lot of his time to describing the upper town and the lower “Seatown,” the bay and the harbour, the promontories and caves (Scarnose and the Whale’s Mouth), Lossie House (Cullen House, seat of the Seafield family, recently sold, converted into luxury flats, and gutted by fire), and Colonsay Castle (ancient Findlater Casde, a grim ruin perched on rocks along the coast). He stresses the beauty of the natural environment: sea, wind, rocks and sun. Nature is holy, charged with the grandeur of God. The ocean is the focus for spiritual yearnings: the mad laird believes that the “Father o’ Lichts” comes out at night and treads on the sea. The use of the staunch fisherfolk, Malcolm included, helps evoke the Gospels.

MacDonald is affectionate towards the people of his novel, observing
them benignly and forgivingly, but he is not averse to sharply satirising their faults. He criticises the spitefulness of gossip and narrow-mindedness: for example, when Lizzie Findlay, a fisher girl, bears an illegitimate girl by one of the gentry, rumour accuses Malcolm of being the father. The people are dour but strong, in endless conflict with the elements and with their poverty. I can vouch for [31] the accuracy of MacDonald’s description of the fishermen as:

in general, men of hardihood and courage, encountering as a matter of course such perilous weather as the fishers on a great part of our coasts would have declined to meet, and during the fishing season were diligent in their calling, and made a good deal of money; but when the weather was such that they could not go to sea, when their nets were in order, and nothing special requiring to be done, they would have bouts of hard drinking, and spend a great portion of what ought to have been their provision for the winter.

One of the great strengths of the area is the strong community spirit. Fishing is a perilous occupation, and whole towns pull together in time of grief. Another feature of regional character is pride, bordering on touchiness and linked with intolerance of injustice. Malcolm, when employed by the Marquis, wants to buy his own clothes. Education, as I have said before, is highly valued: Malcolm can read Virgil, Horace and Milton, even though supposedly a poor fisherman, and this is not to be seen as an unrealistic detail.

Now we come to the language of the novel; a source of delight to a native speaker of it like myself but a stumbling-block for anyone else. MacDonald has caught the exact vocabulary and idiomatic expression of the area, roughly a triangle from Inverness to south of Aberdeen. The dialect is known as “Buchan” or “the Doric.” Greville MacDonald called it, unkindly, “the most unmusical dialect in Scotland.” It is muscular, wry, energetic, graphic, as all rural dialect is. It involves a blend of alternative sound-rules and a large vocabulary of often untranslatable words; Some are drawn from the vocabulary of Scots in general: “wee,” “bonny.” Some are peculiar to the area: words like [32] “thole” (endure, suffer), “wyte” (blame, responsibility), “partan” (crab), “scunner” (irritation), “spier” (ask), and countless others. These words give a rich texture and lively realism to the narrative, helping the characters to come to life.

MacDonald uses idiom to convey the character of the people,
particularly the stern prosaic comments on emotive subjects: “Whaur’s the
gude o’ greetin’? It’s no worth the saut in the watter o’t” and “We’ll a’ be
deid or lang, an that’s a comfort.” Many robust exchanges in the novel come
across almost as phonetic transcriptions of conversations to be heard in the
area at the present time.

MacDonald uses three types of language. English is used by the
Marquis, who has been something of an absentee landlord, an Anglicised
Scot who relates poorly, in linguistic terms, with his tenants. English is also
used for the main narration and MacDonald’s interpolations and meditations.
The soft Highland idiom, and Gaelic phrases, are used by Duncan MacPhail,
who claims God prefers Gaelic to the “Sassenach tongue.” MacPhail’s
consonants are always soft, and he refers to himself by the feminine pronoun:
“She’ll pe perfecdy able to make ta parritch herself, my poy Malcolm.” The
rest of the “peasant” characters use either the Doric, or a formal precise
English when talking to their betters. MacDonald translates the more
obscure dialect words he cannot resist including for their texture and force,
and claims, through Malcolm in conversation with Florimel, that the Doric
versions are superior:

“What’s the English for skirlin my leddy—skirlin o’ the
pipes?”

“I don’t know. But from the sound of the word I should
suppose it stands for screaming.”

“Aye, that’s it, only screamin’s no sae guid as skirlin.” [33]

All in all, MacDonald as a Scottish writer is underestimated. Modern
readers see the Victorian sanctimoniousness and find it irrelevant to any of
their concerns; Christianity is not bred in the bone these days, and death is
a long way over the horizon, to be shunned, not come to terms with. And
anyone south of Aberdeen is going to have difficulty with the language, and
is going to miss the enjoyable frisson of recognition a native speaker has.
Yet these books should not be overlooked. Most of the text is in English and
MacDonald’s virtues as a writer include a love of life and nature, a childlike
pleasure in observing and celebrating, and a clear-eyed description of the
society in which he grew up. And he can sum up eternal human fallible types
with a comic touch worthy of Chaucer.

Marston, Oxford.

[This is a revised version of a talk Lorna Fergusson gave to the Oxford
C. S. Lewis Society in 1990, where she was able to delight her audience with authentic renderings of many of the dialect passages in *Malcolm*. As a patriotic Scot she is convinced that anyone from south of the border is going to experience “great difficulty” with these dialect passages. They certainly slow down the Sassenach reader, but I have not come across anyone who experiences “great difficulty” with them, so I have toned down a few of her comments. Ed.] [34]