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The George MacDonald Society

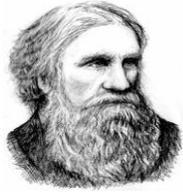
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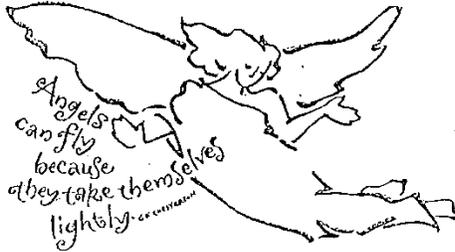
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Orts

The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 53



MACDONALD \ CHESTERTON CONFERENCE

PLATER COLLEGE OXFORD, SEPT. 18TH



We have an impressive array of speakers for this event. Stratford Caldecott, Director of the Centre for Faith and Culture will introduce them all. Father Robert Wild will give the introductory talk on "Chesterton's Debt to George MacDonald." Our President, Stephen Prickett, Religious Professor of English at Glasgow University, will speak next, coming back early from his summer work at the A.N.U. in Canberra for this event. Professor David Jasper, head of the department of Literature and Theology at Glasgow University will be speaking on "The Paradox of a 'St Francis of Aberdeen.'" Dr Colin Manlove is the author of many successful books on fantasy literature in English, all of which have a study of MacDonald's writings at their core. These include *Modern Fantasy*, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*, *Christian Fantasy*, *Scottish Fantasy* and (just published) *The Fantasy Literature of England*. He will be speaking on "G.K. Chesterton and George MacDonald: Strangers and Brothers". Our Editor, David Robb, head of the Department of English at Dundee University, has chosen as his title: "Imaginative but Intimately True": The Novels of George MacDonald." The closing plenary session will be chaired by the Society's Chairman, Richard Lines.

New and second-hand books on MacDonald and Chesterton will be available for purchase on several stalls. These will including rare editions displayed by Aidan Mackay who, as many members know, is not only the Administrator of the Chesterton Archive and Library at the Centre for Faith and Culture, but also the principal specialist dealer in Britain in second-hand editions of MacDonald's and Chesterton's works. Everyone is invited to bring any spare books related to these two authors for sale, with a small donation to Conference funds. Society

Christmas and Greetings cards will be on sale. Mike Partridge will have a display on the Society's website and be available to answer questions. As mentioned in *Orts 52*, if there is sufficient interest, John Docherty will lead walks on the Friday and Sunday following Alice's path round Oxford in *Through the Looking-Glass* and looking at how MacDonald parodied this book in *Lilith*.

The Conference fee of £20 inclusive of lunch and tea is a very reasonable one, as is the overnight fee of £20. Do try to attend. This is an Open Conference, so please tell all your friends who may be interested. Please book as early as you can, because this will be helpful to Plater College, particularly if you wish to stay overnight before and/or after the Conference. Anyone who cannot plan in advance is still welcome to turn up on the day, but in that case lunch cannot be guaranteed. Please book with our Treasurer, Vivienne Forrest, 13 New Wynd, MONTROSE, Angus, DD 1 0 8RB, who will send full details and answer any queries.

PROFESSOR P.H. BUTTER

We are sorry to have to report the death of Professor Peter Butter, a staunch supporter of the MacDonald Society and former holder of the post of Regius Professor of English at Glasgow now held by our President Stephen Prickett.

Professor Butter's widow writes:

I have been asked to write a few words about the sad death of my husband Professor Peter Butter on the 11th of May 1999, just before he was asked to give a paper at the forthcoming MacDonald/Chesterton Conference in September. This would have pleased him deeply as, latterly, George MacDonald's works were a source of inspiration and comfort to him, and he had made a comprehensive collection of them. He had been pleased to contribute financially to Dr Robb's fine book, which reprints two accounts of Huntly in olden times and carries Dr Robb's own introduction to MacDonald and the town of his birth.

My husband himself stood strongly for spiritual values. As Kathleen Raine kindly said in a letter to me: 'he was a good and dear man . . . in a world where few have eyes to see beauty' in spiritual things.

CHRISTMAS CARDS—TWO DESIGNS AVAILABLE

William Webb hopes to produce a new Christmas card for the Society this year. As some members know, William is a fine calligrapher, and the card will feature one of MacDonald's poems. The cards will be printed in two versions, with and without a Christmas greeting. They will fit a standard C6 envelope and within the U.K. will be available from William Webb at 21 Waterer's Rise, Knaphill, WOKING, GU21 2HU. In America they will be obtainable from Emily Tobias, 6611 Lipscomb Dr., DURHAM, NC 27712. If all goes well, members will receive details of the price in plenty of time to order for Christmas 1999.



**They all were looking for
a King. To slay their foes
and lift them high. Thou
cam'st, a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.**

We also still have a few hundred of the old card, designed by an anonymous African supporter who works at a mission near Bulawayo. These are printed in brown on fine buff card. The design is illustrated on the left. The message inside is "Christmas Greetings". They fit C6 standard envelopes and can be obtained from John Docherty, 9 Medway Drive, FOREST ROW, RH18 5NU at £1.20 for ten, including p. & p.—U.K. orders only.

NEWS FROM ITALY

Our Vice-President, Professor Spina, of Genoa University, has been involved, in very different ways, in two MacDonald-related events in his part of Italy this summer.

At Ventimiglia, on the Riviera coast, the municipality sponsored a literary competition titled **GEORGE MACDONALD: THE WORLD OF FAIRIES**. As the principal translator of MacDonald's works into Italian, Prof. Spina was a member of the organising committee. On July 3rd, on the occasion of the announcement of the winners, girls, boys and grown-ups, Prof. Spina gave a talk on MacDonald as a man and a writer and on the MacDoald Society.

Earlier this year we were sent initial publicity brochures for an ambitious one-week 1st **EUROPEAN BIENNALE OF CULTURAL JOURNALS** from the 8th-13th June in Genoa, to include three days of debate by the 'editors of about 70 journals' on 'issues related to culture in Europe.' This seemed a very ambitious 'first-time' project and we had not come across any mention of it elsewhere, so we asked Prof. Spina if he had heard of it. He had heard nothing at all, but he very kindly went to a great deal of trouble searching out information for us. He was able to discover very little beforehand but went on the day it was supposed to open and found only one attendant who said that the exhibition was still in course of preparation! Not to be daunted, he went again next day. By then there was indeed a display of journals, including back issues of *North Wind*, but in a chaotic assemblage. On behalf of the Society he was able to convey dismay at the lack of local publicity to the organisers and the hope that the experience they have gained will be put to good use when the next Biennale is being arranged!

Professor Spina has agreed, *d.v.*, to be our guest at the MacDonald Workshop in Northern Italy reported in the last *Orts*. Plans are going ahead and we hope to be able to announce some details soon.

MORE EVENTS PROPOSED

A.G.M We feel it is time the Society broke with the tradition of always holding its AGM in London. To give Scottish members a better chance of attending, we hope to be able to hold our 1999 AGM in Dundee in October. As usual, the business meeting will be accompanied by a talk and a social gathering.

Three-Day Conference Because of several unconnected and wholly unpredictable events, the MacDonald/Chesterton Conference had to be reduced from a three-day to a one-day event. This has meant that few overseas visitors can attend-although we are delighted that several people will be coming from the Inklings Gesellschaft, including Professor Elmar Schenkel. Plans are now being put in hand to make the Society's next Conference in 2001 a three-day event. We would be pleased to receive proposals for specific topics to be explored at that Conference.

Gordon 2000 The Society will be participating in this '3-day celebration of Scottish history' from Aug 4th-6th at Huntly. It will be 'one of Scotland's premier Millenium events. '

ONE PERSON'S EXPERIENCE OF ENCOUNTERING MACDONALD'S BOOKS

Most of us found our first encounter with MacDonald a life-transforming experience:—even if we were fortunate enough to encounter the fairy stories in childhood; or even if we initially encountered rewrites of the novels and only later realised how immeasurably deeper the originals are! But by any standards, the background to Robert Abendschan's experience, which he describes below, has been remarkable.

Amongst the greatest of MacDonald's stories is "The Golden Key." The key, of course, is the key of the true Imagination. The handle of the key is 'set with sapphires.' The bright azure of these stones is a traditional symbol of **wisdom-filled love**, a symbol used by MacDonald at several crucial places in his writings. Such love is an integral part of the Key, which cannot function properly without it. In prison, cut off from all day-to-day relationships with family and friends, Robert has come to understand this aspect of the Key particularly well. He has been placed in a situation where he has the opportunity to see the paramount importance of God's love in the world, *and with MacDonald's help he has seized this opportunity with both hands.*

A Brand-New Adventure

by Robert Abendschan

George MacDonald never existed . . . Now that I have your undivided attention let me complete that opening sentence . . . George MacDonald never existed for me until a few short years ago. In fact, quite honestly, good books didn't either. When I was a boy at school, books consumed too much time for me to be bothered. What a pity. It was at the age of 44 that I seriously began to read. What a surprise to find that I enjoyed it!

This new adventure began with the writings of C.S. Lewis. His delightful land of Narnia, the courage of the children, the love and sacrifice of Aslan drew me in like a child drawn to a toy store. The outer space adventure of Mr. Ransom as he met new intelligent creatures on Malacandra, destroyed the demonic influence of Prof Weston on Perelandra, and ultimately saved the world from That Hideous Strength back in his own England fascinated me and awakened new thoughts about our planet and others in the universe.

Next I met J.R.R. Tolkien who so capably plunged me into the land and life of Hobbits. Bilbo Baggins became my mentor and Frodo my hero.

I learned that Lewis and Tolkien, in addition to being friends and members of the Inklings, had something else in common. Both were heavily influenced by the writings of George MacDonald.

One day I happened to mention to my wife Sandra that I was interested in this connection, and by the expression on her face that said basically, 'You haven't read George MacDonald?', I knew I had to find his writings.

My first taste came by way of the wonderful trilogy about the life of the Revd. Walton, a minister in the U. K. MacDonald painted priceless portraits in my mind of a country and a people that one cannot help but love. Then he helped me to know more about humility and God's provision as I lived vicariously in Sir Gibby. He taught me more about the power of God's love and faithfulness as I became Donal Grant. I lived his fears and felt his pain at the loss of his love, and was proud of the determination in his decision to teach boys how to grow up rather than live a life of wealth in the castle.

Then came my favourite fantasy of all, *Lilith*. As I read I could see so much of myself in Mr. Vane, not the virtues, mind you, but the impulsiveness, the vices, the defects that were him. I laughed at his foolishness in thinking his own methods and strengths were better able to accomplish God's will in his life and I grew angry and a bit impatient with him in his seemingly compulsive need to do things in his own way. I cried when I felt the pain of his failure, mourned at his defeat, then cheered at every victory over evil he experienced.

Best of all, George MacDonald painted a portrait of love, reminding me of the old adage: it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. I felt the affection Mr Vane had for Lona, and when he loved Mara, I loved Mara. I saw the eyes of Eve when she looked at him with compassion and felt her motherly encouragement. I knew the bond he experienced with Adam.

To say George MacDonald was given the gift of adjectival description is to state the obvious. What better way to describe beautiful hands than to say: 'Even her hands shone with a white radiance, every "pearl shell helmet" gleaming like a moonstone"?'

I particularly found a bit of myself where Mr Vane describes himself:

I sighed-and regarded with wonder my past self, which preferred the company of book or pen to that of man or woman, which if the author of a tale I was enjoying appeared, would wish him away that I might return to his story. I had chosen the dead rather than the living, the thing thought rather than the thing thinking! . . . 'Any man,' I said now, 'is more than the greatest of books!' I had not cared for my live brothers and sisters, and now I was left without even the dead to comfort me!

Through reading MacDonald, I am becoming acquainted with a man who didn't just know God, but knew Him intimately, who knew how to express the grace and power of Christ in defeating evil. There is much of his writing yet to enjoy and I know from what I've read so far that when I've taken in every word he penned, I will know My Lord with an intimacy I cannot now begin to understand. When I get to Heaven, after I fall at the feet of My Lord and feel His embrace, one of the first people I want to hug and say thanks to will be George MacDonald. I'll say to him: 'Thank you for being so sensitive to God's love and compassion and for sharing it with me. This has helped make my journey here much easier. '

AN IMPORTANT NEW EDITION OF MACDONALD'S SHORTER FAIRY TALES

Penguin Books expect to publish in September under their Penguin Classics imprint: George MacDonald, *The Complete Fairy Tales*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by U. C. Knoepfelmacher, 352 pp. \$13.95.

The book is scheduled to be published in Britain in January 2000.

If the notes and introduction are as sensible and perceptive as the blurb, this will be a very good edition, although the cover illustration looks conventionally 'twee.'

The potted biography of MacDonald which Penguin have issued as part of the pre-publication publicity restricts itself totally to matters relevant to a 'classics' edition and will seem unusual to many readers:

GEORGE MACDONALD (1824-1905) was born in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Briefly a clergyman, then a professor of English literature at Bedford and King's College in London, he was a popular lecturer and published poetry, stories, novels and fairy tales.

The blurb is likewise worth reproducing in full:

George MacDonald occupied a major position in the life of his Victorian contemporaries, and his dazzling fairy tales earned him the admiration of such twentieth-century writers as C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and W. H. Auden. Employing paradox, play, and nonsense, like Lewis Carroll's Alice books, MacDonald's fairy tales offer an elusive yet meaningful alternative order to the dubious certitudes of everyday life.

The Complete Fairy Tales brings together all eleven of George MacDonald's shorter fairy tales, including "The Light Princess" and "The Golden Key," as well as his essay "The Fantastic Imagination." The subjects are those of traditional fantasy: fairies good and wicked, children embarking on elaborate quests, journeys into unsettling dreamworlds, life-risking labors undertaken. Though they allude to familiar tales such as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Jack the Giant-Killer," MacDonald's stories are profoundly experimental and subversive. By questioning the concept that a childhood associated with purity, innocence, and fairy-tale 'wonder' ought to be segregated from adult scepticism and disbelief, they invite adult readers to adopt the same elasticity and open-mindedness that come so naturally to a child.

We cannot, of course, carry a review of the book until it is due to be published, but we hope to include one in our next issue.

A Strange Letter to Ruskin

The latest issue of *The Canadian C.S. Lewis Journal*, number 91, continues the very high

standard of recent issues. Of special interest to MacDonald enthusiasts are book reviews of Rolland Hein's *Christian Mythmakers* and Harry Verploegh's *3000 Quotations Taken from the Writings of George MacDonald*. These two books have been reviewed in Orts, but different aspects were emphasised there. The most important MacDonald article is by Prof. Glenn Sadler. In *Orts* 43, Rachel Johnson reviewed an article by Prof Sadler "Where are the Missing Letters of George MacDonald" which appeared in number 91 of the Journal. (Prof Sadler is the MacDonald consulting editor for The Canadian C.S. Lewis Journal, so he often writes short pieces for them.) Rachel particularly mentioned 'an unsigned letter in typescript which MacDonald supposedly wrote, but Ruskin supposedly never received.' This long letter is reprinted in full in Sadler's earlier article where Sadler himself, quoted by Johnson, describes it as 'one of the harshest letters MacDonald ever wrote.' This is a considerable understatement: it is absolutely horrifying. We were astonished that MacDonald could have written anything even half as cruel. That he might have sent it seemed 'wholly out of the question. We are therefore very relieved indeed to see Prof. Sadler's new article in which he corrects the authorship of the letter. He now states that it:

was enclosed in a letter sent to MacDonald by Rose [La Touche] who requested that he send it to Ruskin after reading it. The letter, which may have been sent as a telegram was probably never, according to Leon Derrick [a Ruskin researcher], received by Ruskin. It is possible also that MacDonald never even attempted to send the letter, knowing what its contents might do to Ruskin. (9).

It is, of course, impossible to determine with certainty that the letter was not sent. But, as its mood is so wholly contrary to anything one can imagine MacDonald sending to anyone, let alone to a person to whom he acted as confessor, it seems rather unkind to MacDonald merely to suggest it is 'possible' that he never attempted to send it. In such circumstances it would be more plausible to say that it was 'probably' never sent. That it 'may have been sent as a telegram' seems even more unlikely, because to do so would have cost the equivalent of well over fifty pounds in present-day money'

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