

1-1-2010

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Tania Scott

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### Recommended Citation

Scott, Tania (2010) "Good Words: At the Back of the North Wind and the Periodical Press," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 29 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol29/iss1/4>

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## Good Words: *At the Back of the North Wind* and the Periodical Press

Tania Scott

George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) is a well-loved children's classic even today, but a new critique may be found in considering the circumstances of its first publication. Through an analysis of the novel's early incarnation in serialized form, we may examine the importance of collaboration and reception to the work and how MacDonald's own contributions to periodicals, in particular to *Good Words for the Young*, affect the text.

The study of George MacDonald's works, including *At the Back of the North Wind*, is split into several modes of approach, all of which can be found in previous editions of this journal. It is worth considering for a moment how these areas of criticism differ to demonstrate the benefits of coming to the work through periodical culture. There are those critics such as Ginger Stelle studying the Victorian writers who look mainly at his realistic fiction. There are those like David Robb who study him through Scottish literature and thus tend to focus on the novels with a Scottish setting. There are those who look at him through the tradition of fantasy literature, placing him alongside C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, and others, notably Colin Manlove in his extensive work on the fantastic mode. Then there are the children's literature specialists who do not always take into consideration the trends in adult literature at the time. Finally, there are those who look at the Christian aspects of MacDonald's work and tend to neglect its status as commercial literature. All these approaches are certainly productive, but the appeal of looking at *At the Back of the North Wind* through the prism of its relationship with *Good Words for the Young* is that the periodical itself combines Victorian society, Scottish elements, fantastic literature, children's literature, and religious ideologies. *Good Words for the Young* thus enables a general rather than a specialist approach to MacDonald's works.

The children's journal *Good Words for the Young* ran from 1868 to 1877, with slight variations in format and name along the way. The periodical's origins lay in *Good Words*, a nineteenth century adult periodical set up by the influential Victorian publisher Alexander Strahan, and at first Norman MacLeod edited both. MacLeod was a well-known author and a

supporter of the Established Church who would later become one of the founders of the Evangelical Alliance. Like MacDonald, MacLeod was committed to improving people's lives through the Church and this intention shows through in his periodicals. *Good Words for the Young* was advertised off the back of the reputation of its parent publication, as the following advertisement which ran in several national newspapers shows:

GOOD WORDS FOR THE YOUNG will aim at being such as the child can thoroughly enjoy by itself, such as the grown person can also enjoy, and above all such as the two can enjoy together. It will be issued once a month, as a sort of supplement to "Good Words." But while it will thus appeal specially to the readers of "Good Words" (by all of whom it is expected to be "taken in"—the children regularly getting their "Good Words" as well as the elders), it will, of course, be complete in itself, and, it is hoped, will gather round it a large constituency of its own. (*Daily News* 8)

Like its progenitor *Good Words*, the impetus behind the new children's paper was to aim for a distinctly Christian tone, and to reinforce the conventional family unit. The intention was not for a tyranny of theology, however, but rather for an open-minded work which had an over-riding concept of the importance of the faith alongside a celebration of the creative endeavour. Contributors included Charles Kingsley, Mrs. Craik, and W.S. Gilbert, as well as canonical children's authors such as Hans Christian Andersen.

MacDonald was initially involved with *Good Words for the Young* merely as a contributor. However, in 1869, he took over the role of editor from Norman MacLeod. In the October of this year MacLeod announced his resignation in favour of his friend in his Editor's Address:

I have a peculiar pleasure in intimating that my friend, MR. GEORGE MACDONALD, has kindly undertaken the duties of the office. The Boys and Girls who read this Magazine—and every Boy and Girl of sense does so—may now rest assured that, like a splendid racing yacht, *Good Words for the Young* will beat all competitors, having such a fine "Old Boy" at the helm, and a steady "North Wind" at his back. When I have a little more leisure, and if the Editor will give me leave, I may occasionally meet my youthful readers again for fun and frolic "as in the days when I was young," and sometimes, too, for more serious talks, such as they will one day, sooner or later,

thank me for. In the meantime, may God bless the Boys and Girls, and the Magazine, and its Editor. (MacLeod 589)

MacDonald returns the favour in the next issue in a short piece entitled “The Editor’s Greeting” where he mimics MacLeod’s style:

After what my honoured friend, the ex-Editor of *Good Words for the Young*, so kindly wrote in the last Number, little is required of me beyond greeting my old friends in my new capacity. I promise to try to please them. I think it is the duty of everyone to please everyone else, where nothing wrong is involved. . . . Dr. Macleod has left me such a good staff of helping friends, that I start with ease. To resume his simile, he has handed me the tiller-ropes with a fair wind filling the sails, and an able crew, every man fit to be captain himself, crowding the deck; so that I may trust well to bring the yacht *Good Words for the Young* into the port of Good Hearing in safety every month. (“Greeting” 56)

The simile used by both editors of two different captains of the same ship is interesting, as is MacDonald’s focus on pleasing his readers. MacDonald is setting out his stall not just for the journal, but also for his own fiction, where appealing to the reader is his central concern.

*At the Back of the North Wind* is the epitome of this agenda.

Serialized in *Good Words for the Young* from the first issue in November 1868 to its last installment in October 1870, it was later published in book form in 1871. As a bound work it is a test for the younger reader, and its episodic, disjointed structure has led to complaints that it is “rambling” and “too long” from the *Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature*. (Carpenter, et al. 34). However, it would have appeared very different to the children reading it in its serialized incarnation and this earlier format counters some of the charges of harsh modern day critics.

Through an analysis of specific episodes from *At the Back of the North Wind* in their original serialized form, we may appreciate how these sections appeared to the early readers, read as MacDonald intended them to be read. The novel’s central character is Diamond, a sickly young boy who is named after the horse whose stable is below his bedroom. One night Diamond meets the North Wind, who appears to him in the form of a young woman who is eerily beautiful and other-worldly, yet caring and compassionate. She takes him on various journeys, and the child is never sure if they are actually happening or are just dreams.

One of Diamond's early trips with the North Wind is to see her sink a ship. Naturally, Diamond is concerned that this is unnecessary cruelty, and questions how a "good" creature such as North Wind can do such a thing. Colin Manlove comments that "*At the Back of the North Wind* is unique among MacDonald's fantasies in putting doubt at its core beside faith" (55). This episode is filled with doubt, and even though North Wind tries her best to pacify Diamond, his fears are not fully soothed.

When Diamond asks her how she knows that she is right to sink the ship, North Wind explains:

I will tell you how I am able to bear it, Diamond: I am always hearing, through every noise, through all the noise I am making myself even, the sound of a far-off song. I do not exactly know where it is, or what it means; and I don't hear much of it, only the odour of its music, as it were, flitting across the great billows of the ocean outside this air in which I make such a storm; but what I do hear, is quite enough to make me able to bear the cry from the drowning ship. So it would you if you could hear it. (MacDonald, September 1869 540)

North Wind encourages Diamond to have faith, to listen for the "song," and to look for the pattern of rightness in the world, even during terrible events. The message of the importance of faith to make sense of our world is clear in this passage. Later North Wind drops Diamond off in a Cathedral while she leaves to create the storm which sinks the ship. The boy's immediate feeling on seeing the Cathedral is terror at the grandeur of the building, contrasting sharply with the emphasis on the holiness and wonder of the natural world earlier in the novel.

In the church, Diamond falls asleep in front of a stained glass window depicting the apostles. While he is asleep the narrative changes into another of the dream-realities that litter the novel. Dreams and reality are not closed categories in *At the Back of the North Wind*, and one can quickly slip into the other. Early on in the novel Diamond is unsure whether his meeting with North Wind is dream or reality: "Diamond woke very early in the morning, and thought what a curious dream he had had. But the memory grew brighter and brighter in his head, until it did not look altogether like a dream, and he began to doubt whether he had really been abroad in the wind last night." (February 1869 178)

In Diamond's dream the apostles step down from their window to see what this intruder into their Cathedral is:

“I have it. . . . This is one of North Wind’s tricks. She has caught him up and dropped him at our door, like a withered leaf or a foundling baby. I don’t understand that woman’s conduct, I must say. As if we hadn’t enough to do with our money, without going taking care of other people’s children! That’s not what our forefathers built cathedrals for.”

Now Diamond could not bear to hear such things against North Wind, who, he knew, never played anybody a trick. She was far too busy with her own work for that. He struggled hard to open his eyes, but without success. (October 1869 574)

To Diamond’s horror the affronted saints go on to criticise the Wind’s presumptuousness:

“She should consider that a church is not a place for pranks, not to mention that we live in it,” said another.

“It certainly is disrespectful of her. But she always is disrespectful. What right has she to bang at our windows as she has been doing the whole of this night? I daresay there is glass broken somewhere. I know my blue robe is in a dreadful mess with the rain first and the dust after. It will cost me shillings to clean it.”

Then Diamond knew that they could not be Apostles, talking like this. They could only be the sextons and vergers and such-like, who got up at night, and put on the robes of deans and bishops, and called each other grand names, as the foolish servants he had heard his father tell of call themselves lords and ladies, after their masters and mistresses. (October 1869 574)

There are no illustrations accompanying this section in *Good Words for the Young*—it may be that it would have seemed even more blasphemous had the materialistic apostles appeared visually as well as verbally. One might consider the irreverence for the saints in this book as a criticism of Catholicism, but even MacDonald’s Calvinist background would not have encouraged such a critique of holy figures. This section, then, appears to be at odds with MacDonald’s lifelong commitment to Christianity, and indeed he was often criticised for his unorthodox faith. Rolland Hein in his biography of MacDonald states:

When Strahan, apparently in response to some reader dissatisfaction, had suggested that something MacDonald had written was either not orthodox or not pious enough,

MacDonald exploded to Louisa [his wife]: “What does Strahan mean by sending me such rubbish? If he thinks to turn me into a slave of *Good Words* and *Good Words* into a slave of foolish people, I shall soon cut my moorings.” (Hein 210)

George MacDonald, then, although happy to be a part of the periodical culture of his era, would not compromise his artistic and theological vision for the delicacies of publishers or of the public.<sup>1</sup>

It may be mere coincidence, but this controversial section of the novel appears in the same edition of *Good Words for the Young* that MacLeod resigns his editorial duties, and MacDonald takes the helm of the paper. Also in this edition is one of the Lilliput Lecture series by Matthew Browne, a series of miniature sermons that were aimed at the child readers of the journal. The focus of this particular lecture is “Thoughts of God,” and it contains the following passage:

It is very wrong to be afraid of bogeys or hobgoblins in the dark, and there is a sense in which it is wrong to be afraid at all, seeing we are all in the hands of the God of whom we are trying to speak; but for all that, darkness is awful, because it is full of uncertainty, and unless we know where we are, it may be full of danger to be forced to move in the dark. We cannot tell what there may be in the darkness more than we know of. (559)

This combination of faith and doubt echoes Diamond’s worries in MacDonald’s novel and it is also significant that although it talks of God, faith, saints, and martyrs, Browne’s lecture does not contain the word *church*. Like MacDonald, then, Browne seems to embrace a more individual concept of faith, one that does not rely on the institutions of Christianity, whatever sect they may belong to.

Another section of the text that highlights the way the text interacts with the periodical format is the crafty story-within-a-story, “Little Daylight.” At this point in the novel there is a shift in focus from the countryside to the city, and Diamond has been trying to help the sweeper girl Nanny and save her from her depressing existence in deepest poverty. Nanny falls ill and is taken to a children’s hospital by Mr. Raymond, Diamond’s philanthropic mentor. Diamond goes to visit Nanny at the hospital and listens as Mr. Raymond tells the sick children the fairy tale of Little Daylight.

The way in which this story is introduced by the enigmatic narrator of *At the Back of the North Wind* is fascinating:

I do not know how much of Mr. Raymond’s story the smaller

children understood; indeed, I don't quite know how much there was in it to be understood, for in such a story every one has just to take what he can get. But they all listened with apparent satisfaction, and certainly with great attention. Mr. Raymond wrote it down afterwards, and here it is—somewhat altered no doubt, for a good story-teller tries to make his stories better every time he tells them. I cannot myself help thinking that he was somewhat indebted for this one to the old story of *The Sleeping Beauty*. (June 1870 424)

The overall narrator is thus indicating how his readers should approach Mr. Raymond's narrative—as a fairy tale—as well as hinting at the allegorical nature of the story. “Little Daylight” is a beautiful fairy tale in its own right, telling the story of a princess cursed by a wicked fairy so that she may only come out at night and must fall asleep as soon as the sun begins to rise. Little princess Daylight is governed by the moon so that when it is at its most full she is at her most beautiful and when it wanes she appears as a haggard old woman. A prince, who finds her in this haggard state, kisses the princess, thus breaking the spell, and the story ends with Princess Daylight watching the sunrise for the first time. The story is a transparent warning to avoid focusing on purely material beauty and follows MacDonald's interest in the spiritual over the material world.

This fairy tale within a fantasy narrative has interesting implications for the novel in terms of form and genre. The mixing of narrators and styles bears a direct relation to the periodical in which the novel is serialized. The switch from one narrator to another, from a largely realistic world to the realm of fairy tale, is less surprising to the reader of the novel in its original serialized form than to those encountering the printed novel. To elaborate, the issue of *Good Words for the Young* in which the “Little Daylight” episode appears features travel narratives, an essay on “animal defences,” a hymn complete with musical score and various pieces of fiction, both prose and poetry. The contemporary reader of the periodical was thus more prepared than the present day reader of MacDonald's work to accept changes in narrative, style, and form in their readings.

“Little Daylight” is also interesting as it includes fairy characters; it is, in fact, literally a “fairy tale.” MacDonald uses terms such as *fairy* and *fairy tale* in various works, and each time he seems to mean something different—the fairy element in *Lilith*, for example, seems very different from that of the two *Princess* novels. This obsession with fairies can again be



traced through MacDonald's involvement with the periodical press.

There was rarely an issue of *Good Words for the Young* that did not contain some fiction mentioning fairies or fairyland. One of the most interesting is a short piece by Dinah Mulock Craik entitled "The Last News of the Fairies," which gives a conversation with a Yorkshire man detailing some local sightings of fairies. When questioned if the fairies might still exist the pragmatic Yorkshire man replies: "The folks hereabouts used to think so—at least they did before we had Mechanics' Institutions and those sort of things to tell us it wasn't possible. But some of the old people believed in them for a long time." (Craik 256)

Fairies are thus viewed in the periodical in a rather nostalgic fashion, something no longer really believed in yet this belief is somehow missed. George MacDonald's fascination with the world of fairy may at first seem incompatible with his commitment to Christianity, but one could argue that it shows his interest in all kinds of belief and all representations of the spirit world. For MacDonald, fairyland is not a dangerous pagan realm, but an imaginative space where the spiritual supersedes the material, as is shown in the following quotation from his novel:

Diamond, however, had never been out so late before in all his life, and things looked so strange about him!—just as if he had got into Fairyland, of which he knew quite as much as anybody; for his mother had no money to buy books to set him wrong on the subject. I have seen this world—only sometimes, just now and then, you know—look as strange as ever I saw Fairyland. But I confess that I have not yet seen Fairyland at its best. I am always going to see it sometime. (January 1869 113)

Fairyland can appear in our everyday world but must be accessed through the faculty of the imagination and the spiritual. On a similar note, Colin Manlove has noted that the setting of *At the Back of the North Wind* is notable for being set in the real world as opposed to the two *Princess* novels which are set in the realm of fairy:

Part of the reason for the continual doubt in *At the Back of the North Wind* is that Diamond does not live in a fairyland where marvellous or supernatural events are relatively common, but in a material world that does not believe in such things, and sees all his experiences with North Wind as delusions. MacDonald is trying to bring his fairy vision together with real life. Equally, however, he is working the other way round, to show that

what we take to be real life is just as wonderful, just as much a thought in God's mind as an imagined world. (56)

Diamond's journey towards spiritual understanding, from innocence to experience, is thus all the more poignant by occurring in the world of the everyday, where there are no supernatural aids to help him interpret his experiences.

Another incursion by fairies into the novel is MacDonald's use of James Hogg's Kilmeny story to enhance the narrative of Diamond's experiences in the land at the back of the north wind. In this part of the novel, North Wind takes Diamond to visit the land at her back, a place beyond our material world, beyond death. The problem of discerning reality from dream is added to in this section by the narrator casting doubt on the possibility of relating Diamond's experiences in this wondrous place:

I HAVE now come to the most difficult part of my story. And why? Because I do not know enough about it. And why should I not know as much about this part as about any other part? For of course I could know nothing about the story except Diamond had told it; and why should not Diamond tell about the country at the back of the north wind, as well as about his adventures in getting there? Because, when he came back, he had forgotten a great deal, and what he did remember was very hard to tell. Things there are so different from things here! . . . The fact is, we have different reports of the place from the most trustworthy people. Therefore we are bound to believe that it appears somewhat different to different people. All, however, agree in a general way about it. (December 1869 83)

The narrator thus disparages Diamond's ability to relay his experiences, calling into question the veracity of the entire narrative. In contrast with this unreliable narrative, the narrator provides the reader with the following lines from Kilmeny as an example of a more reliable account of the fairy realm:

Kilmeny had been she knew not where,  
 And Kilmeny had seen what she could not declare;  
 Kilmeny had been where the cock never crew,  
 Where the rain never fell, and the wind never blew.  
 But it seemed as the harp of the sky had rung,  
 And the airs of heaven played round her tongue,  
 When she spoke of the lovely forms she had seen,  
 And a land where sin had never been;

A land of love and a land of light,  
 Withouten sun, or moon, or night;  
 Where the river swayed a living stream,  
 And the light a pure and cloudless beam:  
 The land of vision it would seem,  
 And still an everlasting dream. (December 1869 83)

By framing Diamond's own story of his journey at the back of the north wind with the Kilmeny intertext, MacDonald provides an element of the familiar—Hogg's text would have been well-known to most contemporary readers—to ease the reader's excursion into the deeply unfamiliar realm that Diamond enters. The illustrations, which might have explained Diamond's narrative to the child reader, are confined to showing Diamond walking through the ice to reach the land beyond death, and a breath-taking picture of North Wind still as a statue forming the entrance to her realm. The illustrations to *At the Back of the North Wind* were drawn by Arthur Hughes, one of the foremost illustrators of periodicals at this time. These images are an important part of the novel and add to the mixing visually of forms the novel takes on the page. Sarah Phelps, in an essay on illustrations in Victorian periodicals, notes the importance of the relationship between author and illustrator:

Like Carroll and Tenniel, MacDonald and Hughes had a special artistic rapport that made the illustrations seem to fit the text perfectly. The illustrations to *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) are considered by many to be Hughes's best. MacDonald's stories are a strange mixture of a very real world and a world of fantasy. Arthur Hughes draws the real child protagonist of *The North Wind* realistically but draws the female personification of the north wind as a truly fantastic figure whose hair and clothing are made up of swirling lines, which fill up every picture with a decorative pattern that engulfs the real-looking child in a make-believe world. (63-4)

The illustrations, then, contain the same mix of realism and fantasy that is so marked in MacDonald's novel. It is the combination of strict realism of setting and fantastical elements such as the personification of the North Wind that has led to difficulties of categorization for MacDonald's novel. The realistic and fantastic elements, it could be argued, conflict and combine to create a less than unitary whole. Colin Manlove, in contrast, sees this inconsistency as the novel's strength:

He writes a fantasy. And in his case this means that he makes

a book that in part embodies the imagination that is the source of his fantasy, being an apparent chaos, full of interrupted narratives, songs, strange dreams, visions and fairy stories; a book that often frustrates its readers' desires for sense and clarity, and drives them to a more intuitive and intimate experience of its material. (57)

Again, this reader is not passive, but actively involved in creating the novel. This is pertinent to Diamond's excursion to the back of the north wind. The role of the reader in understanding this realm is outlined by Jean Webb in an essay on the novel:

In *At the Back of the North Wind*, the agent for change is Diamond, who is morally pure and innocent. MacDonald's world of fantasy is better described as an adjunct world, for Diamond moves to the back of the North Wind, yet the happenings there are not observed by the reader, nor can Diamond clearly transpose such into reality. This country lies within the imagination of the reader, and is recalled by Diamond through the poetry and music he brings back with him as a memory of his experiences. (17)

The reader thus must piece together his own vision of the land at the back of the north wind using extracts from the novel but crucially also his or her own imagination. There is a collaboration, then, between MacDonald and his young readers where the author encourages them to actively involve themselves in the same quest for spiritual certainty that Diamond himself undertakes.

Diamond's story closes with his death and final journey to the land beyond the North Wind. MacDonald's young readers have been taken on their own narrative journey through a progression of themes and forms throughout the novel. It is through an understanding of the position of those first readers, encountering the work in its serialized version in *Good Words for the Young*, that we may better comprehend the variety of the work and MacDonald's reasons for presenting it as he did.

#### Endnote

1. On a side note, in one "simplified" version of *At the Back of the North Wind* created by Elizabeth Lewis and published by an American firm in 1914, this rather disrespectful portrait of the apostles has been entirely deleted. See Elizabeth Lewis's 1914 adaptation.

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