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We know that our author and his family went to Northern Italy for health reasons. Biographers such as Joseph Johnson and Greville MacDonald are full of particulars about the dreadful persecution he suffered from the so-called “family attendant” and his continual search for health. In order to retrace the halting places of his lifelong struggle, I mention his stay at Kingswear on the Channel coast in 1856 and, the same year, at Lynton on the opposite coast of the Bristol Channel. We know, moreover, that he wintered in Algiers, and the following year (1857) he rented Providence House, renamed Huntly Cottage, at Hastings.

Only a few years later, in 1863, he changed his London dwelling place, moving from Regent’s Park area to Earl’s Terrace, Kensington, because of the clay ground of the former and the healthier dryness of the latter. In 1867 the MacDonald family spent their holidays at Bude in Cornwall, and in 1875 they found a warmer climate at Guildford, Surrey, and then at Boscombe (Bournemouth).

It appears that all these removals did not give them a final and satisfactory solution. Probably the ideal climate did not exist in Britain. But at last a new horizon did open. Just at the end of September 1877, Louisa MacDonald, along with Lilia, Irene, and Ronald, arrived in Genoa from Mentone. It was not by chance, but the result of a decision the MacDonald family had taken, surely advised to do so by friends and physicians. Liguria was then well reputed among the English as a particularly healthy region of Italy.

This statement requires further considerations which may offer the clue for a new and yet unforeseen aspect of MacDonald’s biographical studies. But let’s start by putting everything at the right time.

Since the eighteenth century Italy was the destination for the “Grand Tour” through the Continent. To English travellers like Nugent, Smollet and Sterne Italy meant Rome, Florence, Venice and Naples, but not yet Liguria or Genoa in particular. Genoa was neglected after the fall of its valiant republic, which had traded with England during the Elizabethan period.

It was the Italian Risorgimento which attracted the renewed attention to Genoa which was to be paid by the English poets of the second Romantic

generation. In the early twenties of the nineteenth century Shelley lived at S. Terenzo (La Spezia), on the shore of the bay named “The Poets’ Gulf” after him and his friends. Before leaving for Greece, Byron paid a visit to Genoa as a guest of Lady Blessington, who lived then in the villa of St. Francis of Albaro, in the aristocratic quarter of Genoa, not far from “Villa Bagnorello,” where Charles Dickens and his family spent the first period of their two years’ stay in Italy (1844-’45).

Till then the English had been in Liguria for political or cultural reasons. What caused the sudden discovery of the sunny shores of the two Rivieras, the balmy air, the temperate winters? English travellers might have described the Ligurian coast in their accounts of their travels, but the strongest call for the wonderful climate of S. Remo [20] and Bordighera came from the novels of a Genoese author, John Ruffini.

Ruffini was born in Genoa in 1807, two years later than Giuseppe Mazzini, the apostle of the Italian Independence, and his countryman, fellow citizen and friend. They were compelled to flee, for their conspiracies, to Paris and London along with other Italian patriots. John Ruffini spent 41 years abroad in France and England, and during his long exile he became a writer and novelist in English. From 1853 his books were published by Constable in Edinburgh and favourably reviewed by the most important literary magazines. The first one, Lorenzo Benoni, was full of autobiographical details. Ruffini’s aim was to gain England for the Risorgimental cause. This purpose he pursued in the second book, a novel entitled Doctor Antonio, in which he tells the story of a certain Sir John Devenne and his daughter Lucy, who set out on a tour through Italy. They are delayed at Bordighera by an accident, and Lucy falls in love with a young doctor. The story ends sadly, for Lucy is destined to a brilliant marriage in England, while the impoverished doctor feels bound to join his Neapolitan comrades engaged in the insurrection against the Bourbons.

Doctor Antonio appeared to be a historical novel and a delicate, sweet love story. But there was more to it. Ruffini had the talent to draw a wonderful picture of the Riviera, and of Bordighera in particular. As for S. Remo, ten years later, in 1865, he sponsored tourism, as it were, by writing an article in MacMillan’s Magazine entitled “S. Remo Revisited.”

Thus in the second half of last century the two Rivieras became famous in England for their incomparable climate, [21] sunshine, eternal spring on the blue shores, scent of balmy trees and flowering shrubs everywhere. Could it be possible that the MacDonald family’s decision had
been influenced by this literature? If not directly, then indirectly through friends and advisers?

On this point I have one more consideration to advance. Professor Alexander John Scott, who was a teacher of English literature at University College, London, and a great friend of George MacDonald since the days of his lecturing in Manchester, met Mazzini and Ruffini, probably with Thomas Carlyle’s introduction. Joseph Johnson states:

Scott took a great interest in Mazzini and the band of Italian heroes and liberators. He met Saffi when he visited England, and had a great admiration, that in time became a friendship, for Ruffini. (A Biographical and Critical Appreciation, p. 36)

My question is, could MacDonald have had news of Ruffini and his works, from Scott or Carlyle? If so could he have had news of Ruffini’s death, which occurred at Taggia, only a few miles from Bordighera, in November 1881, when MacDonald must have been wintering at Casa Coraggio?

But to come back to the MacDonald family in Liguria. As I said, Louisa, Lilia, Irene and Ronald arrived in Genoa and rented a flat at Villa Cattaneo. Built at the end of the eighteenth century, the palace is still there as an aristocratic family estate, unlike the neighbouring villas which have become the property of the public administration. Villa Cattaneo, with its luxuriant Italian garden, stands on a gentle slope towards the seaside of Nervi, a suburb on the Eastern outskirts of Genoa which became a famous seaside resort crowded with foreigners. [22] The present address of Villa Cattaneo is Via Fravega, 3, S. Ilario—Nervi.

George MacDonald was then in London, engaged to find a publisher for Paul Faber, Surgeon, the novel then in progress, and had to clear out The Retreat, his house at Hammersmith later rented by William Morris. He joined his wife along with Mary Josephine and other sons and daughters, the next December, so that the family could be happily reunited for the Christmas holidays.

I like to remember the description of Villa Cattaneo MacDonald wrote in a letter to Carey Davies:

a great house surrounded with orange trees, some full of fruit. We look straight South nearly right down on the Mediterranean which delights us with colour. (George MacDonald and his Wife, p. 480)

There he composed a poem on Palazzo Cattaneo of 8 stanzas, and another for
his friends dated “Christmas 1877, Nervi.”

We may presume that the “family attendant” had been finally defeated as far as George was concerned. They had found the right place at last. However, it was too late for Mary Josephine. She died there the next spring, on April 27th 1878, and was buried in the Nervi cemetery. In June the MacDonaldis moved from Nervi to Portofino, the charming bay at the cape of a huge and impressive promontory. Greville wrote,

They took for a twelvemonth the Villa Baratta at Portofino—a romantic situation overlooking the little bay of the town and across to Rapallo. It is about a third of the way between Genoa and Spezia, its station being S. Margherita, three miles along a good road closed at both ends, so that the journey was done by row-boat. (George MacDonald and his Wife, p. 486)

Villa Baratta is still there, now as “Hotel Splendido,” [23] at 13 Viale Baratta. The climate proved to be so restorative that George resumed his writings, finishing Paul Faber quickly and starting a new novel, Sir Gibbie, for which he drew inspiration from the Porto-fino natural surroundings.

On this point an example may be given. The writer spent daily some hours in a boat on the sea with his children. They delighted in bathing, fishing and so on. One day, while they were rowing home from S. Margherita a thunderstorm rose suddenly:

the thunder was less awful than in his native latitudes, but the lightning was much finer, splitting the firmament in slanting coruscations. (George MacDonald and his Wife, p. 488)

George did not forget the scene and, years later, when writing The Flight of the Shadow, he reported faithfully the description of the lightning he had put down that very day soon after his arrival at home:

It was the burst of a ball-headed torrent of fire from a dark cloud, like water sudden from a mountain’s heart, which went rushing down a rugged channel, as if the cloud were indeed a mountain, and the fire one of its cataracts. (The Flight of the Shadow [1891] p. 68)

The year’s stay at Portofino was marked by another mournful visit from the “family attendant”: Maurice, only a boy of 15, died in March 1879, and was buried up there among the rocks. Greville wrote,

The cemetery of Portofino stands on a promonory embracing the bay, so that its chapel looks on one side to the busy little quay and on the other away over the blue Mediterranean.
Meanwhile a home had been built at Bordighera and, thanks to many friends, it was their own. It was a four- [24] floored building, squarely grounded, with large rooms, a huge living-room, and a stucco tower. Outside, all round, were orange trees, oliveyards, vineyards, palms, gardens full of fragrant flowers, orchards and kitchen-gardens. The MacDonalds had sunshine, light, warmth everywhere and all the year round, and the salted scents of the blue sea abounding in fish.

“Casa Coraggio” it was named, and there the MacDonald family wintered for nearly 24 years, full of events both glad and painful. In April 1881 Caroline Grace, the third daughter, was married to the Rev. Kingsbury Jameson, rector of the nearby parish; and the following year her little Octavia was born. The new family went to live in Casa Grazia, a small villa not far from Casa Coraggio, standing along a side-street to Via Antica Romana, where some years later Doctor James Linton Bogle went to live, and also, at a different time, Doctor John A. Goodchild, a curious man who claimed to have discovered the Holy Grail in the premises of an old English abbey. It was he who was involved in a serious quarrel with an Italian colleague in the late eighties, a quarrel in which George MacDonald intervened on his behalf.

But happiness was to be as short as the smile of an angel. Caroline Grace died in May 1884, and Octavia in February 1891, both stricken with different forms of tuberculosis.

The stay of the MacDonalds at Bordighers was troubled too by another dramatic event: the earthquake. We have a record of the calamity through the letters of George and Louisa to friends in England. Greville, in his biography, wrote, [25]

At 5.30 in the morning of February 23rd, 1887 [it was Ash Wednesday], the terrible earthquake began, lasting until 9 a.m., and beginning again in less severity the next morning. Its centre was Nice, and it extended from Milan to Marseilles; so that Bordighera, distant from Nice only a little more than twenty miles, was entrapped in its fellest grip. (George MacDonald and his Wife, p. 513)

The novelist was inspired by the calamity to write the novel A Rough Shaking in which he used sentences like this:

The whole bulk of the building began to shudder, just like the skin of a horse determined to get rid of a gad-fly. (A Rough Shaking, p. 45)
Or he took the opportunity to describe the wonderful villages up in the Maritime Alps that seemed to have climbed up to look over the heads of other things . . . each with its churches standing highest, the guardian of the flock of houses beneath it, whence were seen many a water-course, mostly dry, with lovely oleanders growing in the middle of it; over multitudinous oliveyards and vineyards; over mills with great wheels, and little ribbons of water to drive them—running sometimes along the tops of walls to get at their work; over rugged pines, and ugly, verdureless, raw hillsides—away to the sea, lying in the heat like a heavenly vat in which all the tails of the peacocks God was making, lay steeped in their proper dye. (*A Rough Shaking*, p. 41)

In the tragic circumstances the MacDonald family proved to be courageous and full of altruism. When the second earthquake occurred Louisa was sitting in the English church at the organ. She did not hesitate to play the Hallelujah Chorus. Along with her husband and sons, she generously gave assistance and shelter to the wounded and homeless. [26]

Many are the particulars of the long stay at Bordighera. I want to mention the Wednesday Afternoons when George lectured on Dante and Shakespeare to the English colony as well as to the local Italians. George was absolutely free from prejudice, either social or religious. Casa Coraggio was open to English and Italian people, rich and poor, protestant and catholic. His friendship and solidarity with Father Giacomo Viale, a Roman Catholic priest from Bordighera who opened charitable institutions (and we can see here George MacDonald as a forerunner of the ecumenical movement) gave offence to certain of the English, who were likewise disturbed by the flock of Italian children crowding Casa Coraggio during the Christmas seasons. As Lord Mount-Temple wrote in his memorials,

> That house, Coraggio, is the very heart of Bordighera, the rich core of it, always raying out to all around, and gathering them to itself . . . . Sometimes there were concerts and theatricals for our amusement or for some charity, and this winter there was a concert for the completion of the Church of the poor of the Marina. (*George MacDonald and his Wife*, p. 511)

I add that this church, named the Church of the Holy Land, was then close by the shore. Nowadays it is between the main street of Bordighera and the railway line.
Another member of the MacDonald family, the dearest, was about to disappear in the Dark River: the sweet, tender-hearted, generous Lilia died in George’s arms on Sunday November 22nd 1891, and was buried on the 25th. She was 39 years old. “The day was terribly wet: all nature was lamenting,” remarked her brother Greville. The unhappy parents never recovered from their deep sorrow. [27]

In 1901 Casa Coraggio was full of guests because sons, daughters, cousins and old friends celebrated George and Louisa’s Golden Wedding. J. Johnson wrote,

On March 30th [but it appears to have happened on March 8th] 1901, the festival of their golden wedding day was kept with great honour and love. The large salon was beautifully decorated with flowers sent by hosts and friends, and all round the room were festoons of orange foliage with its golden fruit. The great open fireplace was filled with yellow mimosa. (A Biographical and Critical Appreciation, p. 66)

It was the last happy, blissful day. George had lost the power of speech. Louisa died in January 1902 and was buried in the Arziglia, the Protestant cemetery of Bordighera. The family left the town forever. George spent his last three years in England, devotedly nursed by his daughters Irene (who had married Cecil Brewer) and Winifred, then Lady Troup. He died at Ashstead, Surrey, on September 18th 1905. His body was cremated at Woking and the ashes buried at Bordighera, “beside the body of his wife” stated Greville. Really, as I discovered, in the very same grave with his wife. In fact, some years ago, I paid a visit to the Cemetery and stood absorbed, looking at the marble slab surrounded by lofty cypresses. Although half erased by the ravages of time (especially the salt winds from the sea), the name of Louisa Powell MacDonald is yet readable. But, astonishing observation, not a word of George. Looking better and more attentively at the grave, I saw the slab all framed by a stone moulding where, at last, I could read the beloved name all round the inner side of the frame.

As for Casa Coraggio, after the MacDonalds’ departure [28] it had an illustrious dweller, the Ligurian writer Edmondo De Amicis, the author of a famous sentimental book for children entitled Cuore (Heart). Born in 1846 at Oneglia, a town on the Western Riviera, only a few miles from S. Remo, De Amicis was a popular author of educational books along the lines of Samuel Smiles, the English writer then copiously translated into Italian. De Amicis died at Casa Coraggio in 1908.
Casa Coraggio’s wall, on the side facing Via Vittorio Veneto, soon had two memorial tablets, the first, on the right, devoted to George MacDonald, the second, on the left, to Edmondo De Amicis.

Years later the house became a hotel: Hotel de la Reine, viz., Queen’s Hotel. Then it was an apartment building whose ownership passed to a Building Society in Turin named “E. De Amicis” after the Italian writer. Today, a plan has been made for a radical restructure of the building; so Bordighera public administration and myself are waiting for the work’s completion in order to get the memorial tablets erected again.

As for the church, a massive, low, stone building, firmly planted in the middle of a square lawn, and now completely surrounded by a crowd of new blocks of flats, I am sorry to say that it is closed for Divine Service because of the departure of the last rector. It was rumoured that the landowner of the area had in mind to sell the whole piece of ground as a building site, so the public administration of the town undertook to buy it and to keep intact the religious and cultural estate. Inside is the most precious organ in Liguria, built more than a century ago (probably at the end of the eighteenth century) according to the rules of an ancient Genoese school of woodcarving. In the aisles [29] are several memorial tablets in praise of benefactors. One of them says, “Caroline Grace MacDonald Jameson, wife of the Rev. Kingsbury Jameson and daughter of George MacDonald. (1854-1884)” Nearby are the names of George and Louisa.

To conclude, I will relate briefly MacDonald’s fortunes as a writer in Italy, which have been very weak up to now. Outside Bordighera he was not just a neglected writer—he was completely unknown.

Perhaps sixty or seventy years ago, a delicate and learned woman, Maria Pezze Pascolato, translated a few lines of MacDonald’s poetry: “The Child.” It appeared in school anthologies, which I used as a boy, then completely unaware of what the name of George MacDonald should mean. Because it is included in the anthologies the date of the translation is uncertain. Anyway, this was the only place where the name of George MacDonald ever appeared in Italy.

In 1970, through my interest in English and American authors of Gothic tales, supernatural and fantastic stories, along with names like those of Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, Wilkie Collins, Poe, William Morris and so on, I discovered MacDonald as the author of Phantastes and Lilith. To him I turned my studies and researches, both in London and in Bordighera. My first result was the translation of Phantastes which appeared in Milan seven years
ago entitled *Anodos*. Subsequently I published in Genoa two essays. The first, *George MacDonald, the Neglected Victorian*, deals with the writer’s life and fantasy works. The second, *The Realism of George MacDonald* [30] [31] [Note: image not available] deals with his novels, both Scottish and English. They got reviews, the most important of which appeared in the newspaper *Tempo* of Rome, and were signed by Mari Praz and Pietro De Logu. The Italian Broadcasting Corporation (R.A.I.) devoted a regional radio coverage in 1979. I have not at all given up my commitment to George MacDonald, my next target being the translation of *Lilith* and the short fantasies.

**Christmas at Casa Coraggio**

The following is an extract from a letter by Francis William Troup to his brother James MacDonald Troup. Francis and his older brother Charles Edward Troup paid frequent visits around the 1890’s to their cousins the MacDonallds. Edward for a time tutored the younger MacDonald boys in his vacations. Mackay MacDonald was studying medicine at King’s College Hospital, where James Troup and Greville MacDonald also did their medical training. [32]

7 Jany 1891

. . . We have been very busy in a way else you should have had a reply long ere now. First two or three days all spare time was taken up with washing dishes & cleaning up after meals—they were short of servants. So that we had very little of odd moments left. Then, there were Christmas trees and stuff of that sort—rather rot except that there were nice girls about and then of course it was all right. There is a party of 20 of us in the house—so you may guess there’s some fun and lots of nonsense. There’s one jolly little girl with the reddest hair I ever saw. Mackay and I are both gone on her and I have had some narrow escapes with my life through my successful efforts to excite his jealousy. She has plenty of money but she is “semi-engaged” Mackay says—a somewhat perplexing predicament to be in. Anyhow it seems neither of us have a chance. Then there’s the beauty—an awfully pretty girl with lovely hair—but she isn’t half the fun of little redhead. However if I were young and simple I should be over head and ears long ago. Edward is a little there I fancy. There are more charmers besides the
MacDonald ones but these are the two belles of the party—
(oh—good gracious and tomorrow is our last day—oh my
lacerated internals—how shall I bear the shock!)

You see we have been at lots of picnics and drives and when
not at that at long tramps among the hills. Saw last Sunday a
little town perched on top of a hill near 3000 ft high—Church
on the apex all in ruins lying just as it fell in the earthquake
when 200 people were killed in it. They have just built another
new place lower down the hill. What a grind we had that day—
too late in starting and had 2 hours in the dark up among pine

1. 1887. Casa Coraggio was damaged in this earthquake. [33]

woods on a path none of us knew, the most awful track I ever
was on even in broad daylight. Never got such a shaking and
tumbling in my life. And every blessed plant pricks—much
worse than whins and overhangs the charming track in the most
skin-raking manner. We had some good walks, but that day was
our best and longest—just E. and I and Mackay—nobody else
here walks. There has been tennis but we haven’t played as we
had plenty else to do.

We dress for dinner every night which is nice when you are
used to it. Play cards mostly after dinner. You have heard me
“do the hen” I suppose. Cousin George is immensely fond of
it and made me perform to a great company—in fact we had a
regular farm yard. It was regarded as a grand success and some-
thing like a party was invited one evening to have a repetition
of it. A brilliant idea occurred to me in the interval, which
Mackay and I carried out successfully and with enormous eclat.
I sung (sung—by george—what d’ye think of that?) sung “Ye
banks and braes” but as if done by a hen. Cousin George nearly
split himself laughing. I stuck about the last line and to finish
ran in to “The keel row” a la chickie, which was if anything
an improvement. I was encored and instead of trying another
I apologised in Hen language—you never heard such a farce
in all your born days—and there I am going about Bordighera
meeting people at every turn who saw me making a perfect idiot
of myself—my goodness—such is fame. Mr. Hen is my usual
name now or the Chicken! Mackay did the Cats Caterwaul to
the tune of “Home sweet home”—it was simply killingly funny,
but they said not quite so utterly insane as the Hen to music.
Then we imitated mechanical toys and made further fools of
ourselves to the delectation of the assembled company.

We have been at it in a mild way tonight again—but the
finale of the Farmyard comes off tomorrow night, when more
[34] people are coming to hear it. Ours is the first departure
and begins the break up of the Christmas party. We had a jolly
time and no mistake. Ooh—the journey home after 2 weeks
basking in the sun under palm trees and olives. France was as
cold as Greenland—we got hot water pans in the night journey
out every 2 hours, but the windows were caked with ice . . . .
[35]