1989

Orts 15, 1989

The George MacDonald Society

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/orts

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/orts/vol15/iss1/1

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Orts: The George MacDonald Society Newsletter by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact sarah.titus@snc.edu.
The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 15, January 1989

1. **Annual General Meeting.** A dozen people attended the AGM of the Society, held at 58a Westbourne Park Villas, London, on Friday November 18th. The evening fell into two parts, with business first followed by Rachel Johnson’s talk on the MacDonald family and Pilgrim’s Progress. The business section resolved to have a joint meeting with the Lewis Carroll Society in the coming year, and noted that North Wind had cost slightly less than last year to produce. The treasurer told the meeting that the Society now had £177.78 in its account. Tony Richardson, the architect, gave an update on the long-standing project to rearrange the MacDonald-Troup plot at Drumblade Cemetery near Huntly. He mentioned that the eighteenth-century stone had been washed with vinegar and acid so that its inscription was now clearer, but that the stones had not yet been moved as he had asked. Probably a mason from Aberdeen would have to be asked to complete the job. The whole operation plus recutting might, however, cost as much as £1000. It was hoped, too, to fix a memorial plaque to the cemetery wall mentioning George and Louisa MacDonald. In all, though, some progress had been made.

Rachel Johnson, fresh from having fully restored MacDonald’s “Greatheart” costume – a silvery sequined mail – gave an enjoyable and informative talk on the MacDonalds and their travels with Pilgrim’s Progress. This should appear in the next North Wind. Freda Levison hung up one of the curtains that the family had designed and used in the performances, and laid out some interesting memorabilia, including a fascinating album of photos of the MacDonald family in their various parts. The only hitch in the whole evening was that no one could actually be persuaded to try the costume on!

2. We include this item from Michael Phillips on “Why Do I Edit George MacDonald’s Novels?”

*The Fisherman’s Lady* was released in the Spring of 1982. Since then the Bethany House series of my edited MacDonald novels has grown to ten books and I have received a great deal of mail from all over the country in response. Nearly all the comments are positive. But there have been those who have taken me to task for having the audacity to tamper with the originals. “How can you say you love MacDonald?” they charge, “when you cut and change and shorten and slash the beautifully quiet language . . . MacDonald’s prose was drastically chopped . . . it is clear that the editor actually painful to read . . . the editor claims to have such a high regard for MacDonald and treats him so poorly! It’s a shame!”

Needless to say, after reading that letter I went humbly before the Lord and had to do some serious soul-searching. Above all I want to be faithful to MacDonald himself. Therefore I had to ask myself if the work I was doing was representative of George MacDonald’s priorities and spiritual perspectives. I faced what you might call a crisis of confidence with regard to my editorial work. And out of that period several things emerged.

First, I had to admit my own fallibility. True, I may not be the world’s greatest writer or editor. I have made mistakes and will certainly continue to make many more in the future. That is unfortunate, but – alas! – true.

With that as a given, I faced the question of where to go from there. Because I am not a perfect editorial vessel and because some of the original stature of a certain George MacDonald novel may “lose something in the translation” does that mean I should not be doing what I am doing? After a great deal of thought, I arrived at the same conclusion which had motivated me to begin this series back in 1977. The answer to the question was – “Of course I should continue! In his own day MacDonald’s novels sold by the hundreds of thousands and had a profound impact on his generation. In our day the novels have been. Therefore, to be faithful to MacDonald’s original vision, new means have to be found to communicate his spiritual principles to our generation. If that means editing the books so they can penetrate today’s marketplace, then so be...
it. But the most important thing is that they do get out.”

I do love MacDonald! His books and his character have had probably a more profound impact on my spiritual development than any other single man – living or dead. But in the dozen years I have been writing I have grown very practical. Having a vital message is of little use if no one’s listening. Communicating the Christian message in today’s twentieth century requires a shrewdness and – though I hate to say it – a marked place-mentality.

And the fact of the matter is simply this: MacDonald’s novels in the original could never make it today. That is why, in 1977 when I began this project, there was not a single adult novel of his in print. Even Elizabeth Yates’ edition of Sir Gibbie had gone out of print. Not one single novel had survived.

It is all well and good to talk about the originals being better and more “pure,” and so on. But if they are 500 pages and unintelligible, today’s highly commercialized marketplace is just not going to accept them. Don’t get me wrong. I love the originals! I’m simply saying that practically speaking, they can’t vie in today’s market. I know this as a writer, as a bookseller, and as a publisher.

Therefore, the question which faced me as an editor was this: Would it be better for ten or twenty or thirty thousand people to be exposed to MacDonald and possibly helped and blessed, even if it meant the exposure was through the means of an edited edition? Or should I remain a purist and insist that only the “original” MacDonald’s would do? Practicality again. If you insist on only the originals, how many people would be exposed to them? How many copies are there in this country – several hundred . . . maybe a thousand or two thousand all told. How many people are going to have the opportunity to read them?

Not many. On the other hand, if the books were made commercially viable – to interest a publisher and to make them able to grab the average reader – then how many thousands more people could get to MacDonald? The choices seem all too clear. Better an edited version (however imperfectly done) than nothing at all.

Not only that. Because to balance the scales, far and away the greatest amount of mail I receive expresses appreciation on the part of people who say they never would have been able to read the books in the original, even if they had found them. So for these people, I have not diminished the value of the original but in fact have enhanced it – actually made it better. It all depends on one’s perspective and one’s prior association with MacDonald.

And the end result is that at this point over a half a million of the Bethany House edited editions have been sold. Probably over a hundred thousand people have been introduced to MacDonald and his life and writings as a result. These are people who for the most part never would even have heard of MacDonald otherwise. Therefore, it seems clear that the end result is positive, my mistakes and shortcomings as an editor notwithstanding. Even the edited books allow George MacDonald’s mind and spiritual values and attitudes to penetrate into people’s lives in a whole new generation. And this is, after all, what we lovers of MacDonald want to see most of all.

And that is essentially how I view my mission: to accomplish for our generation what MacDonald did in his – to get his message out. If I can do that practically, with one eye on the needs of the contemporary publishing marketplace, while preserving the integrity of what MacDonald stood for, then I will feel I am faithfully representing the man and his vision.

-Mike Phillips

3. **Membership.** The Society now has 97 members, 63 of whom are from the UK, 25 from the USA, 3 from Italy, 2 from Canada and 1 each from Ireland, West Germany, Spain and Singapore.

4. **MacDonald Workshop.** The Southern California C S Lewis Society held a summer workshop on George MacDonald last August, at St. Andrew’s Priory, Valyermo. The Director was Paul Ford, author of *Companion to Narnia*, and the speakers were Michael Phillips and Rebecca Ankeny. Michael Phillips spoke on MacDonald topics as they related to Scotland and its history. He presented a musical slide-show of Scotland, led a discussion on “Was MacDonald a Universalist?” and read Ronald MacDonald’s essay on his father. Rebecca Ankeny spoke and led discussions centered on her PhD thesis, which is concerned with language and the way MacDonald communicates in his works.

5. **MacDonald and William Blake.** The following stanza – by Blake – could be a seed for the thread in *The Princess and the Goblin*: 

```
Orts: 15 (1989)

```
I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at heaven’s gate,
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.

Can any member tell us where it comes from?

6. **Brown Chytis.** Dr. Anthony Barke confirms our guess that “brown chytis” is really bronchitis (Orts 14). He writes, “When I was a student and a young doctor in Birmingham 50 years ago, bronchitis was called the brown chitis, in that unique rising-at-the-end-of-the-word accent of the black country. I’d not be surprised if the name is not still in use.”

7. **1662 Society.** The Society is hosting a talk on Tuesday Feb. 7th in Dr. Williams’ Library, Gordon Square, London WC1, on “Isaac Watts on Improving the Mind”. On Monday March 6th the topic will be “The decline of Presbyterianism in England after 1662”, at City Temple, Holborn Viaduct, London EC1. Proceedings are due to start at 7.30, but cold supper, tea and coffee will be served from 7.00pm. Charge for non-members is 50p per lecture.

8. **Subscriptions.** If you have not yet paid your subscription for 1989, please do so promptly. Rates are £6/$15 single; £10/$19 joint; and £9 for overseas members. US subscribers may if they wish send their subscription to Randall and Emily Tobias, 2528 Glendale Ave, Durham, NC 27704, USA. Otherwise they should send the overseas rate of £9 sterling to Rachel Johnson, 97 Hykeham Rd, Lincoln, LN6 SAD, UK.

9. **Orts** is published by the George MacDonald Society. Editors are Kathy and Tony Triggs, 22 Sherwood Close, Bingley, West Yorks, BD16 3EL, UK.