George MacDonald at Blackfriars Chapel

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Although it is a central fact of his life and writing, George MacDonald’s rebellion from orthodox Calvinism is rather hazily presented in Greville MacDonald’s biography of his father: we are kept at a distance from this crucial development. Greville seems not to know for certain when or how his father rebelled. The nearest he comes to it is to pass on a tradition from within the family:

When little more than seventeen he was in some form or other asking himself the general question, What need for the Gospel if the elect and no others are predestined to be saved? But probably it was during his sojourn in the far North that his Calvinistic chains became intolerable. Such a view seems to have been general at home, and his Uncle James, who adhered to the old teaching with quiet satisfaction, expressed it as his opinion.

The “sojourn in the far North,” of course, is the period spent, during the summer of 1842, cataloguing the library of a northern Scottish castle, an episode which Robert Lee Wolff and others believe to have been significant, in any case, on account of a hurtful love affair. It is in accord with this interpretation of events that Greville comments that a letter from eighteen months earlier “shows that George still accepted the conventional dogmas without questioning”:

Aberdeen, 5 January, 1841

My Dear Father,

I am much obliged to you for the kind letter which you sent me some time ago. I hope I wish to serve God and to be delivered not only from the punishment of sin, but also from its power. Our potatoes and meal are both almost done. Be so good as to send a fresh supply as soon as convenient . . . . Mr Kennedy was at our Sabbath school soirée in the Old Town. He preaches most excellent sermons, and he never closes without saying something to the unconverted.

I am, Your ever affectionate son,
Geo. MacDonald. (p.68)
Casting doubt on this view, however, he also insists that his father “conscious that the awakening began long before his eyes were open, would ascribe no such definite period to his conversion.”

I well remember (he wrote forty years later) feeling as a child that I did not care for God to love me if he did not love everybody: the kind of love I needed was the love that all men needed, the love that belonged to their nature as the children of the father, a love he could not give to me except he gave it to all men. (p. 85)

Greville quotes this from *Weighed and Wanting*, obviously completely untroubled by theoretical problems arising from the fictionality of the narrator’s voice. As it happens, it is often fairly safe to take what a narrator says to the reader of a MacDonald novel as indeed representing what MacDonald, in his own person, wants the reader to think, and I have no doubt that in 1882 George MacDonald believed that even as a child he had been rebelling against what he saw as a religious untruth. Such a version of his own life would have accorded very satisfactorily with his general belief that each of us has a child-nature which naturally seeks the Heavenly Father of a love-filled Creation. This testimony from MacDonald’s old age, however, receives no clear support from the rest of Greville’s biography and in the absence of better evidence to the contrary, we are forced back to the view that it was during MacDonald’s years as a student in Aberdeen that his theological doubts developed significantly.

One is loath, on the other hand, to rest content with the view that the experience of those few summer months in the northern library were alone crucial, even though Greville lays explicit stress on the way a sudden broadening of his reading must have fortified his theological capacities: “the new intimacy with a wider literature; which the great library made his, was, I repeat, food to his powers” (p. 86). That the summer of 1842 was a formative one I have no doubt, but it seems worth looking elsewhere for possible sources of MacDonald’s budding unorthodoxy. Greville himself hints at the possibility of further relevant circumstances, but his account is brief, sketchy and designed, if anything, to play down the intensity of the episode to which he distantly alludes, making his father’s activities appear little more than a student prank, a piece of adolescent fooling:

From 1840 to 1844 a veritable storm began to rage over the whole congregational body of Scotland. In Glasgow, students were expelled from the Congregational Theological Academy
for adhering to Dr Ralph Wardlaw’s doctrine of Universal Redemption, and a number of Congregational Churches were disendowed for holding like views. These and the excitement engendered by the offer of release from some of their mental chains took strong hold of certain young men attached to the Blackfriars Congregational Church in Aberdeen, greatly to Dr Kennedy’s concern. Among these black sheep most certainly was George MacDonald. Hence arose the anxiety of some of his best friends, not the least disturbed being his brother Charles, then in business in Aberdeen, who felt accountable for his junior’s doctrinal respectability. But vigorous brain-work was going on all round him . . . (p. 79)

An investigation into these circumstances reveals that what is here presented as a youthful peccadillo was, in fact, participation in a bitter dispute which led to a split in the congregation and gave George MacDonald, almost ten years before he was forced to resign from his charge at Arundel, the experience of being publicly pilloried, along with others, by the adherents of theological orthodoxy. It is not clear why Greville should have played down this episode. Perhaps he really did not know much about it. Perhaps the memory was too uncomfortable to MacDonald himself for him to make it easily accessible to those who came after him: the way in which he may have shrunk from direct communication of that other putative painful episode from the same period—the encounter with the flirt in the library—adds to the possibility. Perhaps, too, Greville tended to avoid damaging the impression, which his biography subtly but firmly conveys, that MacDonald’s theological rebellion was entirely a matter of something welling up from within. Convinced of his father’s rare significance, Greville offers him as one of a very few, special bearers of a message of universal salvation to a long-heedless age. In fact, as a young Congregationalist in the North-east of Scotland in the early 1840s, and, specifically, as a member of Kennedy’s congregation, MacDonald was caught up in a widespread universalist controversy, which in itself is enough [5] to explain why these new beliefs became an important feature of his adult thinking. Whatever may have been his juvenile stirrings, it seems most likely that it was during his student years that he turned from orthodoxy, and that this development, far from being a purely personal inner turmoil experienced during a retreat to northern isolation, was hammered out in the heat of public controversy. It was not MacDonald’s universalism which made him unusual; rather, it was
the originality and imaginativeness of the literature in which he eventually expressed it, which set him apart from his age.

Even before he went to Aberdeen in August 1840, MacDonald may well have associated the unorthodoxy of universalism with a movement which was far from being the special province of the chosen few to whom Greville gestures—John Macleod Campbell, Erskine of Linlathen, etc. Late in the summer of 1839, there began at Cabrach, only fifteen miles southwest of Huntly, a revival centred specifically on a message of universal redemption. To the Independent (Congregational) church of this notably isolated and insignificant parish, there was sent a young minister called James Morison who, when he arrived there, was studying revivalist literature and undergoing a thorough re-examination of his faith. Morison was a member of the United Secession Church, one of the many Independent denominations which, since the eighteenth century, have existed alongside the established Kirk of Scotland. His preaching swiftly caught fire in the minds and hearts of his small numbers of hearers, made up of farmers and their households from a wide area around the tiny hamlet of Cabrach itself. It would seem that quite independently of Macleod, Campbell and others, Morison, studying his Bible alone on the high Cabrach plateau, had found himself rebelling against the traditional Calvinist dogmas. He seems to have been no one’s disciple, but rather to have hammered out his new ideas for himself—hence, perhaps, the peculiar incendiariiness of his preaching. [6]

In 1841 Morison was excommunicated from the United Secession Church, as were his father and two other Secession ministers in the following two years. With them, he founded and organised the Evangelical Union, and consequently, within a very few years he became one of the most prominent Scottish churchmen of his day. In the 1840s, those who were drawn to his views of the atonement were referred to as “Morisonians” and the controversy he started had a profound effect on the life of many of the churches loosely labelled “Independent.” The established church, of course, was largely preoccupied with other matters at this time, since the Ten Years Conflict, a period of controversy which ended in 1843 with the creation of the Free Church of Scotland, was coming to a head. James Morison is not to be confused, of course, with the Rev. John Morison who was instrumental in finding George MacDonald his tutorship in Fulham (Greville MacDonald, pp. 91, 92).

Thus, we can be fairly certain that in the winter of 1839-40, George MacDonald, in his last year at home in Huntly, must have been aware of
the radical theology which was so shaking—and revitalising—the religious life of the Independents in the North-east of Scotland. In the absence of firm evidence to the contrary, it seems unlikely that his own mature views on the atonement anticipated Morison’s: there is nothing to suggest that he greeted Morison’s sudden prominence in late 1839 with any special fervour. Furthermore, the letter of 5 January 1841, quoted above, does not suggest a fully-fledged Morisonian. I think we must conclude therefore, that the probability is that it was Morison’s eruption in the Cabrach in 1839 which instigated the process of MacDonald’s rejection of traditional teaching on the atonement. Whether such an impetus, unaided by further developments, would have been sufficient to eventually bring him to the views he later held, is something we can never know, for the Aberdeen church to which he attached himself was soon to be pulled asunder by argument on this very issue.

MacDonald was drawn to Blackfriars in particular by the appeal of the minister, Dr George Kennedy, to the intelligent and fervent young. This aspect of his ministry is widely recorded. Here is how one historian of Aberdeen church life, Alexander Gammie, puts it:

“The blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked young man” soon made his presence felt in the city. Though young, he was well educated, and he was a born preacher, well endowed with Celtic fire and with a liberal allowance of “perfidium ingenium.” He described his congregation as follows: “It is small; it is Aberdonian, and, therefore, inclined to be critical; it is old.” The first and the last of these estimates he soon nullified. He drew great congregations, and young people, instead of being conspicuous by their absence, were soon flocking in large numbers to the church—students from the two colleges being especially prominent. The flower of the young manhood in the city was to be fond at Blackfriars Chapel in those days.3

According to Gammie, Kennedy made Blackfriars “a centre of intellectual and spiritual influence” (p. 257). He was still a young man of only twenty-seven years when George MacDonald arrived in 1840. Nor were his energies and charisma confined to his preaching. He was tirelessly engaged on behalf of reforming causes: he was against the Corn Laws, he promoted the British and Foreign Bible Society, he was a zealous temperance reformer and was active in Ragged School work, and was one of two secretaries to the newly formed Emancipation Society, which advocated the abolition of American
slavery. He was also a very strict Sabbatarian, as was his deacon Peter Taylor with whom the MacDonald brothers Charles and George lodged. They had to endure drawn blinds from Saturday night to Monday morning, although they could not have been much in their lodgings on Sundays, as the Congregationalists usually held three services.

The extraordinary vitality and commitment shown by Kennedy, however, appears to have had its shadow side. The anonymous historian of one of the Congregational churches in Fraserburgh refers to him as ‘the pugnacious but withal able and earnest Mr Kennedy, of Aberdeen,’ and events soon showed how fiercely severe and uncompromising he could be. We can perhaps taste a little of his abrupt and irascible temperament in the opening entry in a small minute-book from the Blackfriars Chapel, now preserved in the Congregational Church of St Nicholas, Aberdeen.

The occasion for the keeping of the book seems to have ruffled his feathers slightly, a fact not disguised by his apparently keeping the minutes himself:

Vestry. October 2, 1844

At the church meeting this evening the pastor mentioned that he understood there was a desire on the part of some members that a minute book be kept—that the form in which he kept the church book preserved an exact record of every act of discipline—that therefore he saw little good that was to be served by it, but was willing to take the trouble if there were some, however few, who felt it desirable. Two or three Brethren having expressed a desire to see such a book kept, the pastor intimated at once that that was enough to settle the question.

What prompted this desire on the part of some members of the congregation is not clear: one cannot help wondering if it was part of the aftermath of the controversy in which MacDonald found himself caught up.

Greville makes it quite clear that his father was far from being a “black sheep” in Kennedy’s eyes during most of MacDonald’s association with the chapel: “Dr Kennedy had all along been a warm friend to this lad [i.e., MacDonald], as enthusiastic in teaching as learning, and with a sense of responsibility remarkable in one of his years; and to his house he came thrice a week to coach a student” (p. 74). In turn, it seems possible that MacDonald responded, at least initially, to the dynamic young minister, only ten years older than himself, with something akin to hero-worship: his later responses to men like F.D. Maurice and A.J. Scott, as well as his portrayal of the feelings of, for example, young Robert Falconer towards Eric Ericson,
suggest how open he was to this emotion. If so, it would have been an experience of some bitterness to MacDonald to find their relationship being marred by a severe jolt, and himself being regarded as a “black sheep.”

In Greville’s account quoted above of the culpability of the “certain young men attached to the Blackfriars Congregational Church,” it is implied that the immediate source of doctrinal impurity was Dr Ralph Wardlaw, then Principal of the Glasgow Theological Academy, but closer attention to other accounts of the matter place the responsibility elsewhere. It is true that in 1830 Wardlaw had published *The Extent of the Atonement*, in which he had maintained that the atonement was an act capable, in itself, of saving all men—it was of “universal sufficiency.” In its effect, however, he agreed that the atonement was limited, because of the doctrine of election. This set of ideas came to be known as “Moderate Calvinism,” to distinguish it from thoroughgoing Calvinism, which maintained that the atonement was, in itself, only ever sufficient for those for whom it was intended—the elect. When, in 1842, Rev. John Kirk published his *The Way of Life Made Plain*, in which he took Wardlaw’s ideas on the matter a little further, Wardlaw violently disagreed with him. Kirk thought that (to quote James Ross) “not only did Jesus die for every man, but that God’s Spirit strives with every man, and that they who yield are the saved, and that they who resist are the unsaved.” As Ross summarises the position, the “influence of the Spirit was as universal as the atonement of Christ.” (With such formulations as these, we are getting close to the attitudes held by the mature MacDonald.)

In 1844 several students were expelled, as Greville says, from the Congregational Theological Academy in Glasgow, though it appears to have been Kirk’s views which influenced them, not the more moderate and long-standing views of their Principal, Wardlaw. The expulsions ignited controversy among Scottish Independents, already sorely troubled by the activities of Morison and his associates. The outlooks held by these radical voices were collectively labelled “the new views,” and it is obviously to this group that the “black sheep” of Blackfriars were accused of belonging. Greville gives no date for the Aberdeen quarrel, but it seems likely to have been in 1844, when anxiety about the dangers of the spread of the “new views” came to a height and counter-measures began to be adopted in Aberdeen and Glasgow. The nine Glasgow students were expelled in April 1844, and there is no mention of the controversy over the “certain young men” at Blackfriars in the minute book which, as already stated, was begun on October 2, 1844. The minute book does refer, however, to the withdrawal
from the congregation of one lady, who had long ceased to attend due to her disapproval of the steps taken against them. This was at the meeting of October 28, 1846—a long time after the event, it seems.

In the letter of 5 January 1841, MacDonald talks of how “Mr Kennedy was at our Sabbath school soiree in the Old Town.” Blackfriars Chapel itself was just off Schoolhill, in the city centre of Aberdeen, but the congregation also ran a Sunday School in the Town Hall of Old Aberdeen, hard by King’s College. Indeed, the Blackfriars congregation had as many as eight hundred children in its two Sunday schools. Gammie describes the Old Aberdeen school as a religious organisation which in its day had a notable band of workers. In addition to the regular staff, the teachers had the assistance during the University sessions of young men who afterwards rose to positions of influence as Congregational ministers, including Rev James Spence, of Oxford; Rev Robert Spence, of Dundee; and Rev Robert Troup, of Huntly, and another who was also at one time a Congregational minister, Dr George MacDonald, novelist and poet. (p. 252)

The happiness and success of this offshoot of the Blackfriars church, however, was shattered when the staff became suspected of Morisonian leanings, for Kennedy had been outspoken against Morison’s ideas. As Gammie says, “Mr Kennedy took the conservative side, and criticised the new movement with all the vehemence and fire of which he was capable” (p. 258). To clear the air, the Old Aberdeen staff met with Kennedy and his deacons, but the result of the meeting was the sudden dismissal of all those hitherto active in the Sunday school. They were replaced by more orthodox members of the congregation in what a recent writer has described as a “ruthless purge.” The minister’s attitude to the Morisonians within his congregation soon split the church community, and those who opposed him eventually separated from the main body to found another Congregational church in another part of the city centre, in St Paul Street, though by that time, in 1846, MacDonald would have left after having completed his university course. Kennedy himself also soon left, taking a charge in Stepney in London, where he made quite a name for himself. He married, as a footnote in George MacDonald and his Wife reminds us, a sister of John Stuart Blackie, a man with whom in later life MacDonald was on intimate terms, so that Kennedy and MacDonald kept up a friendly contact, “though they differed widely in opinion” (p. 69).
Nevertheless, it must have been a bitter experience of rejection for the young MacDonald to be so dealt with by a man for whom he must have had a high regard originally. These events in Aberdeen were in some ways a forerunner of his later experience in Arundel, when he was at odds with his congregation on doctrine, and there, too, he had to withdraw. Thus, at an earlier age than has hitherto been widely realised, MacDonald found himself an outsider because of his religious instincts, a fact which helps explain, perhaps, the firm confidence of his unorthodoxy when his writings begin to appear in the 1850s. The Arundel rejection must have come to him, not merely as an unexpected development, but with all the power of awful familiarity. Who knows, also, to what extent MacDonald may even have entered upon the Arundel charge with a predisposition to battle for his opinions against the grass-roots opposition which experience probably led him to expect? One can only speculate on this, but one feels on surer ground in pointing out that his Aberdeen church experiences amongst the Congregationalists (a denomination especially prone to splits and controversy: the history of Congregationalists in Aberdeen alone is a tangled web of splits, new churches being founded, once separate congregations amalgamating and regrouping) is indeed itself sufficient to explain that heartfelt sentence at the end of his Preface to England’s Antiphon: “Heartily do I throw this my small pebble at the head of the great Sabbath-breaker Schism.” Nevertheless, David of the small pebbles was a warrior, not afraid to confront the Goliaths in his path; similarly, MacDonald never became a mild turner of the cheek, and it is entirely in keeping with the spirit of his later writing that we find him engaged in a bitter religious dispute so early in his career.

The picture of congregational life, in any case, provided by the Aberdeen minute book is one which it is hard to imagine MacDonald tolerating for much of his adult life, because of the exclusiveness and rigidity which emanates from its pages. The monthly meetings of the entire congregation, of which the book is a record, were partly business meetings, reviewing the petty transactions of the chapel’s worldly existence, but they were also much preoccupied with what they called “discipline.” Like other Congregational communities, the church was very concerned with the moral standing and religious commitment of its members: for many Congregationalists, the laxness of the Kirk in these matters was the main cause of their attending an Independent chapel. The meetings were therefore much taken up with officially accepting individuals into communion with them, or effecting the transfer of members to and from other Congregational
churches in Britain, or with ejecting those who fell short. For each case, two deacons would be appointed as “visitors,” to satisfy themselves, on the church’s behalf, as to the proper course of action. It is on such scenes of public scrutiny that MacDonald bases the episode of Thomas Crann’s hounding of Robert Bruce from the communion of Missionars in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, though MacDonald makes the scene more melodramatic and pointedly personal than such scenes normally were. It would have been rather rare for a person from whom communion was withheld to be present at the relevant meeting: usually they had fallen away from attendance at church long before. Nevertheless, the proceedings can strike a chill in the heart of an outsider, because what is in practice being acted out is the theology against which MacDonald was learning to rebel. Congregationalists were sensitive to the charge that they were presuming to usurp the judgement of God by so pronouncing on their fellows: they denied it, claiming that their sole concern was purity of fellowship at communion. There is indeed a real theoretical distinction here, but as one reads of individual cases it is hard to avoid the impression that the distinction was meaningless in practice. The strictness with which the Aberdeen congregation maintained the purity of their “connection” may strike modern Christians as almost beyond belief, and at moments such as the following, George MacDonald (were he present—as he might have been) must have felt that the traditional theology was no mere intellectual problem, but a flesh-and-blood reality being enacted in front of him. The minute *may* be taken to mean that the visiting brethren made some attempt to speak up for Catherine Cromar, but Kennedy’s brief account sweeps on in such a way as to suggest no hesitation on his part, at least:

Blackfriars St. Vestry. Dec. 30. 1844

Brethren Taylor and Murray reported that they had seen Catherine Cromar and that it was their painful duty to state that she had fallen into flagrant sin and that her feelings at present seemed to be not merely those of shame but of repentance. The pastor stated some former efforts which himself and others had made to stop the progress of her declension—And the church proceeded solemnly, in obedience to Christ, [14] to separate her from fellowship for the sin of fornication.

The following persons were then admitted into the church on the recommendation of the pastor and of the visitors named in the preceding minutes—James Johnston—Daniel Morison—Susan Murray—Ann Robertson—Maria Reith. Jane Reid was
recd. by certificate from the sister-church in Peterhead.

On February 25, 1846, a similar goat was ejected from the company of the sheep:

The pastor reported the case of Helen Wallace who had been imprisoned 30 days for dishonesty—Br. Murray & himself as well as some of the sisters had seen her and found her in a state of deep distress on account of her conduct. After some Brethren had stated their mind, she was solemnly excluded from the fellowship of the church upon which the pastor spoke a few words of warning and counsel.

This fervent seeking after purity of communion began to take on the quality of a witch-hunt during the “new views” controversy, however, for Kennedy and his deacons were relentless in searching out the hearts of those whose views were in any way suspect. Along with the Congregational churches in Glasgow, the Aberdeen group of churches withdrew from fellowship with those congregations in their area which leaned toward the “new views.” There were two such churches, at Printfield and Blackhills. It was decided that the members at Blackfriars could not be in fellowship with anyone attending a church from which fellowship had been withdrawn. Around this time, the minutes mention with some frequency that individual members were occasionally withdrawing because they thought they would be more “comfortable” (the word is used several times) elsewhere. All in all, the impression given by these minutes is of a church under some strain, a feeling enhanced by parts of the letter written from the church to the church in Stepney which in 1846 requested Kennedy as its minister. Explaining that they do not want to lose him, the Aberdeen deacons distantly review, in a tone of weariness, the experiences of the previous few years: [15] [16] [Note: image not available]

We have hard work to make head against the numerous surrounding bodies of professors [professing Christians], or to keep our ground against the pernicious errors that are afloat at present for the Apostles words to the Ephesians elders seem to be fulfilled “also of yourselves shall men arise speaking perverse things to draw disciples after them.”

By the time he left Blackfriars, therefore, some time in the second half of 1845, MacDonald must have lost much of the innocent eagerness with which he joined the Aberdeen Congregationalists in 1840. We know that he
hesitated for some time before committing himself to the ministry: indeed, Greville believes that even after, graduating in April 1845, his father “had not yet cast off [the] chains [of the Shorter Catechism], even though his sinews were fast hardening for the task” (p. 91). Members of the Powell family, with whom he soon became acquainted in London and from whom he chose a wife, found him suspiciously unorthodox, however, and he was critical of the London Dr Morison under whom he sat, “questioning his policy and taste in singling out individuals of his congregation for public reproof” (p. 107). With such models as those of London and Aberdeen before him, therefore, one wonders how he could have hoped to find a secure place for himself in a Congregational charge at that time. Conceivably, he hoped, on moving to Arundel, to be an effective alternative voice: certainly the example of Kennedy in Aberdeen might have suggested the possibility that occupation of the pulpit could enable a forceful man to rule a congregation with a rod of iron. Of course, it did not turn out that way.

Investigation of MacDonald’s church life in Aberdeen brings us a little nearer a precise understanding of the process of his rejection of Calvinist orthodoxy, but we still lack sufficient detail to enable us to finally pinpoint the stages in the growth of his attitudes during the 1840s. Nevertheless, I think enough has been uncovered to help explain the picture of a strained, almost depressive MacDonald which emerges from Greville’s account [17] of his father’s student days, and to bolster the son’s belief that that poem of intense longing and search, *The Disciple*, does indeed reflect MacDonald’s state of mind in Aberdeen (whether or not it was actually written there).

I sit and gaze from window high
Down on the noisy street:
No part in this great coil have I,
No fate to go and meet.
My books unopened long have lain;
In class I am all astray:
The questions growing in my brain,
Demand and have their way.
Knowledge is power, the people cry;
Grave men the lure repeat:
After some rarer thing I sigh,
That makes the pulses beat.
Old truths, new facts, they preach aloud—
Their tones like wisdom fall:
One sunbeam glancing on a cloud
Hints things beyond them all.
But something is not right within;
High hopes are far gone by.
Was it a bootless aim—to win
Sight of a loftier sky?
They preach men should not faint, but pray,
And seek until they find;
But God is very far away,
Nor is his countenance kind. 11

A close examination of the environment in which MacDonald suffered his first reverse and experienced his first serious opposition as he developed his own concepts of Christian truth goes a long way to explaining many of the details of his later treatments of Independent religion and the feelings with which he later wrote. The most valuable result of such an investigation as this, however, is the way it throws into yet clearer relief the precise status of those parts of his fiction which are obviously autobiographical treatments of his Aberdeen years. 18 The distance between the experiences of Alec Forbes and Robert Falconer in “Aberdeen” and those of their creator is wide, and the fictionality of those early “autobiographical” novels is clear. Looking at Blackfriars Chapel during MacDonald’s student years gives us valuable material which helps define the ways in which he made fiction out of his own life—a crucial question in any consideration of his best non-fantasy fiction. That he constantly drew on his own past is obvious: autobiography was one of his principal resources, and the ways in which he used it form important aspects of his creativity. MacDonald’s blend of fact and fiction, however, can be so subtle that great care must be taken both in finding out what, in his novels, is based on fact, and also in using his fiction as primary (and sometimes unsupported) evidence for his biography. This is why it is important to find out as much as we can about MacDonald’s life—Greville’s excellent biography can only be a beginning—and to locate him as firmly as possible in his historical environment.

Endnotes
1. Greville MacDonald, George MacDonald and his Wife, 2nd edition (London 1924), p. 85. Hereafter, references to this work are given after quotations in the text.
10. C. Duncan Rice, p.85.

I am grateful to the minister of St Nicholas Congregational Church, Aberdeen, Rev. John Clark, and to the Church Officer, Dr Winfield, for providing me with access to papers held by the church.

**MacDonald’s Early Love—Consuming Fire or First Comforter?**

**i) An Editorial Note**

The idea that MacDonald had a hurtful love affair while at Thurso (or wherever the Northern library was situated) requires some examination. As I understand it the only evidence to support such an event is in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, where Cupples the librarian recounts such an incident as happening to himself. The ugly little man had gone to put in order a “grit leebrary i’ the north” [Hurst & Blackett, 1867, ch LXX, p. 325] and had fallen head over heels in love with a young lady who continually came and questioned him about the books he was cataloguing; until at length he confessed his love. Cupples tells Alec Forbes:

> I know nothing that happent efter, till I cam’ to mysel’ at the soun’ o’ a lauch frae outside the door. I kenned it weel eneuch, though it was a licht flutter in’ lauch . . . . I sprang to my feet, but the place reeled roon’, and I fell. It was the lauch that killed me. What for sud she lauch?—And sic a ane as her that was no licht-heidit lassie, but cud read and unnerstan’ wi’ the best? [p. 329]

To take this to relate to MacDonald’s own life is perhaps stretching things
unduly, particularly in view of Dr Robb’s conclusion that MacDonald’s “autobiographical” fiction is not [20] reliable as relating to his own life. Can the unfortunate love affair be reasonably cited as support for the idea that some things were too uncomfortable for MacDonald to discuss with his son? There is in fact external evidence pointing to MacDonald’s being infatuated at this particular time in his life with Helen MacKay, his cousin. Greville MacDonald gives the relevant details on p.83: she helped to shape George’s mind, and sympathised with his spiritual anxieties. Although much of the time in London, she visited Aberdeen and corresponded with George, “keeping intimate touch with him.” He wrote poetry for her, some of which she later burned rather than let Louisa see (p. 140). MacDonald grew easily out of this infatuation, probably before she was married in 1844. Considering Victorian morality and MacDonald’s own highly romantic and chivalrous attitude to women (which Helen herself helped to form) it is unthinkable that MacDonald could have continued to “love” her once he knew she was engaged to someone else. Similarly, it is unthinkable that MacDonald should have been unfaithful to his idealised love for Helen by falling for a strange girl in the North.

MacDonald himself, in “A Sketch of Individual Development” [A Book of Orts, Sampson Low, 1895], which I take to be a description of his own spiritual pilgrimage, describes the youth’s first love in terms that accord more with a happy idealistic relationship than one of humiliation and rebuff. He dwells on the inspiration that love brings; and his description characterises well a relationship between a couple who have known each other from very young days. MacDonald’s first love affair, I suggest, took the aspect of the first comforter rather than that of the consuming fire.

ii) A Reply from Dr Robb

The story of the blasting of Cupples’ ardour for a young [21] lady encountered in a private library is probably both the clearest and artistically the best fictional evidence for the presumed episode in MacDonald’s youth, but it is not the only one. Indeed, viewed in isolation, it is no sort of evidence at all on which to base a biographical theory. It is only the existence of other similar patterns in MacDonald’s writing that provides Wolff with any justification for his speculations: Alec Forbes plumbs the depths in his unhappy affair with Kate Fraser when he overhears her with Beauchamp in the library; Campbell, in The Portent, is cataloguing a library just like Cupples when his difficult love affair blossoms; the library is a much used
location in the relationship between Hugh Sutherland and Euphra Cameron in *David Elginbrod*, etc. The number of MacDonald heroes who endure frustrating and enervating relationships with beautiful women is striking, and libraries, whether or not associated with “flirts,” are always charged, in MacDonald, with a special importance. It is the persistence of these images which lends plausibility to Wolff’s notion.

I would suggest that “A Sketch of Individual Development” is too schematised, too idealised a progress for it to be useful as a biographical source. Of course, we all deduce our general notions of the patterns of human experience from our own lives: direct experience is everyone’s primary data for ideas about life in general. Yet MacDonald’s “Sketch” is surely nearer to being a blueprint than to being an autobiography? As for Helen MacKay, I agree that it is probable that the feelings MacDonald had for her were even more intense than Greville suggests, but that he got over his loss of her with comparative ease. This supposition, however, does not rule out the possibility of a more anguished experience of love in 1842.

The drawing of biographical conclusions from fictional data is obviously a risky business, to be resorted to—if at all—only as a last resort and with a becoming hesitancy. It seems to me that one example of what not to do is Richard Reis’s [22] suspicion, on the basis of Alec Forbes’s bad patch and (probably) one sentence near the end of chapter 72 of that novel, that MacDonald’s student days included a period of heavy drinking and whoring. This unlikely theory is alluded to as a fact in the biographical note in the recent Everyman reissue of *Phantastes*—the story has now become a species of literary malicious gossip! No doubt, too, we should be much more tentative than we sometimes are about ladies in libraries.

If ever we discover for certain, however, that his summer of 1842 contained no such lady, we should merely have lost the most obvious explanation for the presence of the motif in MacDonald’s mind: if he did not meet it in life, he must either have met it in his reading, or invented it in response to some powerful inner need. Whatever the truth behind this and other repeated patterns in his work, we shall still find ourselves having to work extensively in that large area where MacDonald’s writing and personal psychology overlap. [23]