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The George MacDonald Society

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Last Year’s AGM.

This was held on Nov 30th 1990 at Westbourne Park Villas. 15 members were present, with 2 observers and apologies from four members. The Committee was confirmed in office for the coming year, and the Chairman’s, Secretary’s and Treasurer’s Reports given and approved. The Chairman said it had “been a good year: the Huntly visit had gone well, membership was up, and several new publications about MacDonald were due out. The Treasurer reported that the Society now had a balance of £181.62, though postage for North Wind still had to be paid. The Huntly visit had made a profit of £93.01. The Secretary announced that he would be out of the country for 6 months, and proposed that John Docherty should stand in as Acting Secretary. This was unanimously agreed by the AGM. [for John’s address see para.13]

Margaret Richardson gave a full account of the Huntly visit, and added that a number of positive things had come out of it: a leaflet about MacDonald had been printed, awareness of MacDonald as a local figure had been raised, there had been a great deal of publicity in the press, new members had joined and, finally, Mr. Hughes, the manager of the Huntly Hotel, had agreed to institute a George MacDonald essay prize at the local Gordon Schools. Freda Levson proposed a vote of thanks to Margaret Richardson and Bill Raeper for organising most of the trip.

Only Richardson reported that the idea had been floated to rearrange the MacDonald-Troup burial plot in Drumblade cemetery, and to put up a memorial tablet to George and Louisa MacDonald. The District Council had agreed to pay half the cost of the memorial – the full cost would be in the region of £2,500. Tony Richardson proposed that the Drumblade fund should be controlled by the Society, but have local trustees: Jimmy Black, a lawyer, who lives in MacDonald’s house, Cyril Barnes, editor of the Huntly Express and local clergyman, and Scott Raeburn of Gordon District Council. It was suggested that a brochure be printed about the appeal.

The Chairman pointed out that although the Society had a draft constitution, this had never been passed at an AGM. Copies of the draft constitution were studied, and it was agreed unanimously to adopt it, with two amendments, as the constitution of the George MacDonald Society.

[It is hoped that every member will receive a copy of the constitution in the next few months]

Homage to a Fantastic Giant.

We thank the Times newspaper for permission to reprint the following article by Alastair Robertson, which appeared in Sept. 29th’s edition:

After less than 48 hours in Scotland, Dr. Malcolm MacDonald from Minnesota had completely lost track of his personal scone count, let alone his oatcake quota. “I mean the hospitality . . . it’s terrific . . . but my cholesterol levels,” he groaned.
As the great-great-grandson of George MacDonald, the Victorian fantasy writer, novelist, poet and preacher best known for the fairy tales *At The Back of the North Wind* and *The Princess and the Goblin*, it seemed unlikely that the young doctor would leave his forebear’s Aberdeenshire birth place with anything less than a coronary.

Sixteen members of the George MacDonald Society, including four direct descendants, an electronics engineer from Indianapolis, a museum curator and a former assistant to Nelson Mandela, arrived this week in Huntly, 40 miles northwest of Aberdeen, on the society’s first visit since it was formed ten years ago.

For four days the members, ranging in age from the low twenties to the mid-seventies, embarked upon an exhaustive bus tour, largely in driving rain, of MacDonald homes and haunts, all identifiable in the six Scottish novels.

Gordon district council, which rediscovered MacDonald this year – a MacDonald guide is in its second printing – hosted a reception in the Huntly public library. Dr. David Robb, of Dundee University, lectured on “MacDonald and his Scottish Heritage” to an audience of 80, and the society, of which Sir John Betjeman was once a member, presented the town with a picture by Sir Hugh Casson, former president of the Royal Academy, whose wife, Margaret, is a MacDonald descendant.

MacDonald’s fairy-tales are regularly reprinted by Puffin. Yet it was his adult fantasy, *Phantastes* (a Lion paperback), that had a profound effect on C.S. Lewis who wrote: “I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master. Indeed, I fancy I have never written a book in which I do not quote from him.”

Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) was a close friend, and tried out *Alice in Wonderland* on MacDonald’s children before he would let it be published. According to MacDonald’s most recent biographer, Bill Raeper, a white rabbit in *Phantastes* partly fits the description of Carroll’s later and more famous creation.

Tolkien was influenced by MacDonald; Chesterton claimed that “he made a difference to my whole existence”, and his work has been translated into Japanese, Italian and German. More than 20 of the 31 novels have been edited into accessible form for the American market (“The George MacDonald Classics Series, retold for today’s reader”).

As a Congregational minister, MacDonald fell foul of the archdeacons of Arundel, in Sussex, when it was put about that the young preacher believed in sort of purgatory and, almost worse, that animals might go to heaven. But publication of a romantic poem, “Within and Without”, put him on the literary map.

*Phantastes* was written in Hastings. In London, MacDonald became the first professor of English literature at Bedford College, and rubbed shoulders with the pre-Raphaelites and the social reformers of the day, F.D. Maurice and Octavia Hill.

The visit to Huntly was conceived four years ago in Bordighera, near the Italian-French border by, among others, Mr. Raeper and Freda Levison (the one-time assistant to Mr. Mandela and a cousin of MacDonald), who is now in her seventies and living in the London suburb of Notting Hill Gate. The pair had been invited to George MacDonald commemoration in the town in which he built a house, Casa Corregio, lived for 25 years and was finally buried.

“It occurred to us, as we frolicked under the swaying palms of Bordighera, that if the Italians could celebrate his death then perhaps Huntly could celebrate his birth,” Mr. Raeper told Tuesday evening’s reception. The last time Huntly remembered MacDonald was in 1924, the centenary of his birth, in what is now a carpet shop and the local dental practice. The dental practice was visited this week, as it happens, by Julia Hett, a great-great-great-niece from south...
Kensington, London, who lost a gold filling on a cough sweet.

Sometime ago Mr. Raeper had asked a now-dead local historian for her impressions of the 1924 celebrations. “She said, ‘there was an afa’ lot of folk, and we didnae' get a cup of tea’,” he reports.

This year marks the 166th anniversary of MacDonald’s birth, a slightly obscure landmark but, as one society member remarked over the Gordon district council sausage rolls: “We’re just four years early for his 170th.”

The high point of the evening was the presentation of Sir Hugh Casson’s picture to Huntly. Married to Mrs. Levson’s sister, Sir Hugh had spent a holiday at the old Macdonald family home in 1938. “We thought it would be nice if the picture could go to Huntly,” Lady Casson said. She was unable to make the trip but had asked that the picture join the library’s collection of books and manuscripts.

“It is,” said her sister, producing the picture from a supermarket carrier bag, “a pastel, the only one he ever did, by a distinguished architect of a building still standing – Huntly signal box.”

The signal box (still working) stands just outside the old MacDonald home on the edge of Huntly, where George MacDonald spent his boyhood and which was the model for the farm in his novel, *Alec Forbes of Howglen*. Today, “The Farm” (as it was known in the family) is owned by Jimmy Black, a local solicitor, and his wife, Morag, who finds a dozen or so MacDonald pilgrims on her doorstep each year.

Most seekers after MacDonald telephone in advance, although an American evangelist once stayed a week under the impression that the Blacks were running a bed and breakfast hotel.

Mr. Black, who wears his kilt for church, has opened the front door on a Sunday morning to a crowd of appreciative young Japanese musicians attending a youth festival in Aberdeen.

Some visitors tend to be more enthusiastic than others. “We had one person who went completely overboard and I had to hang on to her legs as she hung out of the window reciting poetry,” Mr. Black says.

The MacDonald Society members were deeply moved by their visit to The Farm: “This is it. This is what we’ve been waiting for,” said Dan Hamilton, a US Navy electronics engineer who has edited MacDonald novels in America.

“Marvellous, just Marvellous,” beamed Dick MacDonald, a great-grandson and father of Malcolm, the waistline-watching physician from Minnesota.

“Now,” instructed Mrs. Black fiercely, “you’ll have another oatcake.”

Note: Freda Levson was not assistant to Nelson Mandela, although she did know him in South Africa.

3. Thank you to those who wrote pointing out the mistake in ORTS 20. The picture we reproduced was of Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire, and nothing to do with George MacDonald. Our apologies to members of the George MacDonald and William Morris Societies!

4. **Challenge to Members.** Thank you to Raphael Shaberman, William Webb, John Docherty and Giorgio Spina for information on Julie Sutter and Frederick Rolfe. Very little more has come to light about Julie Sutter, but we can add that she wrote and published in 1903 a book entitled *Britain’s Next Campaign*. As for Rolfe, he was an English writer, born in Cheapside, London, in 1860, and died a tramp in Venice in 1913. He took “Baron Corvo” as a pen-name.
Among his eccentric novels Hadrian the Seventh is worth mention, in which a rejected priest is elected to the papacy. Rolfe could not have met GMD in Algiers, though they may just possibly have come across each other later, in Britain or Italy. There is a biography of Rolfe, The Quest for Corvo by A J Symonds, pub. London 1934.

5. **The “Beulah” Curtains and Greatheart’s Armour.** These props from the MacDonald dramatisation of The Pilgrim’s Progress were looked at recently by a member of the William Morris Society at the Victoria and Albert Museum. She seemed enthusiastic about the possibility of housing them at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith (late The Retreat) where the William Morris Society uses the two basement rooms. The final decision will be taken by the William Morris Society Committee.

6. **Fantasy and Retreat.** The bulletin of the American William Morris Society carried an article recently by Pamela Wiens on “William Morris and George MacDonald: Fantasy and Retreat”. She discusses modern claims and counter-claims as to which author was the first to produce prose fantasy, and mentions the fact that Morris literally supplanted MacDonald in taking over The Retreat. She says the home “was purchased from George MacDonald.” In fact, most “homeowners” in Victorian society had their houses on lease, not freehold, and GMD was no exception. Possibly what Morris bought was the unexpired portion of the lease. Ms. Wiens observes that there have been few studies comparing Morris and MacDonald, but mentions: Norman Kelvin, ed., The Collected Letters of William Morris, vol 1. 456-458, 458n, 460, 469 (letters to Jane Morris, 12 March & 2 April 1878); Greville MacDonald, George MacDonald and his Wife, 388; Michael Todd Mendelson, The Modernisation of Prose Romance: The Radical Form of William Morris and George MacDonald (unpublished dissertation, Washington State University, 1981); Richard Reis, George MacDonald (New York: Twayne, 1972); and Kathy Triggs, The Stars and the Stillness (Lutterworth Press, 1986). She adds that the British magazine History Today carried in June 1990 a brief article on Kelmscott House, including a reference to MacDonald’s earlier ownership.
7. The photograph opposite accompanied the *Times* article. The key below will help to identify members.

1. Jimmy Black  
2. John Docherty  
3. Kerry Dearborn  
4. Margaret Richardson  
5. Vivienne Forest  
6. Douglas Summers  
7. Freda Levson  
8. Morag Black  
9.  
10.  
11.  
12. Margaret Troup  
13. Revd. F Lamont  
14. Glenn Sadler  
15. Dan Hamilton  
16. Fiona Marks  
17. Paddy MacDonald  
18. Richard MacDonald  
19. Malcolm MacDonald
9. **Record-setting Photograph.** A portrait by Lewis Carroll of MacDonald’s daughter Irene (who was one of Carroll’s favourite sitters) fetched £9,900 at auction this autumn. It was one of 26 photos sold at Christie’s by the MacDonald family. Seven of them beat the previous record set last May at Sotheby’s, of £3,300 for a single photo.

10. **Top Meadow.** We mentioned in ORTS 19 that admirers of G K Chesterton were hoping for support from other Societies in their aim of purchasing Top Meadow as a study centre. Unhappily this has not come about, but a Chesterton Study Centre has been established in Bedford. A number of interesting items may be seen there, including GKC’s study chair, his toy theatre, the certificate making him a Papal Knight of St Gregory, etc. There are also books from his own library, and an archive collection. For further information contact Aidan Mackey, 15 Shaftesbury Ave, Bedford, MK 40 3SA. UK.

10. **MacDonald Inspires.** We continue to find references to MacDonald in modern studies of various kinds. Corey Bohling, in his booklet *On the Monday Side of the Street*, quotes from MacDonald’s letter of consolation to Mrs. Macleod after her husband’s death [George MacDonald and his Wife, p416], while Dennis Clark’s tract *After Death* includes references to MacDonald’s radical views on the afterlife. Derek Kidner, in his Commentary on the Psalms, Vol 1 (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IVP 1973), quotes from *George MacDonald: an Anthology*, ed. C S Lewis (Bles 1946) para. 85. In his notes on Psalm 39 he says: “What troubles David is the heavy-handed treatment of so ephemeral and vulnerable an offender as man (10f); for he is looking beyond his particular case. This is the paradox that troubled Job . . . and like most paradoxes it concealed unexplored wealth. ‘Everything difficult indicates something more than our theory of life yet embraces’; in this case the fact that man is made for sonship and for eternity.”

MacDonald is surely the inspiration behind Margery Allingham’s detective novel *The Tiger in the Smoke* (1st published 1952), where we find the striking and unusual name of Martin Elginbrode. It was Martin Elginbrode’s epitaph that inspired MacDonald to write his first novel, *David Elginbrod*. In Margery Allingham’s book, Martin Elginbrode is dead, but his widow Meg is haunted by what seems to be his ghost. Readers of *David Elginbrod* will know that the dead David figures in a seance at which his daughter Meg is present. In *The Tiger in the Smoke* Meg’s father, Canon Avril, thinks and speaks like MacDonald the mystic; the following, for example, is reminiscent of MacDonald’s “tidal river” image in *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, Chapter X: “For a fleeting moment he perceived it quite clearly and recognised that he had no existence, no will, no responsibility save in obedience. He was aware most vividly of the great stream of the world’s life on which he floated. He felt it above and below him, gathering speed, moving faster and faster towards unknown rapids. He could almost see the dark waters and hear their roar. But he himself was very quiet, very small, but alert and ready to fulfill his purpose . . .”

Is any member able to confirm that Margery Allingham had read MacDonald?

The film *Labyrinth*, with David Bowie as Jareth the Goblin King, may also owe something to MacDonald. The story of a child stolen by goblins and having to be rescued has obvious affinities with *The Princess and the Goblin*—though the basic idea may well go
further back, to Germanic folklore. The crystal globes Jareth plays with recall that which Anodos breaks in Phantastes, while the one in which he encloses the heroine, Sarah, to show her an image of her self-indulgent dreaming, recalls the globe in which the Wise Woman encloses Agnes (The Wise Woman, Ch 7). The masked ball at Goblin Castle, with its grotesque characters who change to skeletons, is like the “Gruesome Dance” of Lilith. The film acknowledges a debt to illustrator Maurice Sendak; surely MacDonald should be thanked as well?

Finally, an article in The Observer (21st October 1990) states that Angela Carter particularly loved, as a child, the stories of George MacDonald. Angela Carter is known as a producer of fairy tales old and new, having translated the Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault and edited The Virago Book of Fairy Tales, besides reworking many tales in her own novels and short stories.

11. **George MacDonald in Italy.** Dr. Giorgio Spina has translated into Italian three of MacDonald’s stories, The Giant’s Heart, The Light Princess and Photogen and Nycteris. His translation of Phantastes has recently been reprinted by Rusconi of Milan, with the title changed from Anodos to Le fate dell’ombra (The Fairies of the Shadow). He is now researching the influences of German Romanticism on MacDonald, and is going to France this Spring to give 3 lectures at Bordeaux University on a) Life and Works of MacDonald, b) GMD symbolism, and c) Dantesque influences on GMD. We wish him well in his endeavours to make MacDonald known in France and Italy.

12. **MacDonald in Africa.** We have as yet no African members, but we know, of one individual who picked up a copy of The Shepherd’s Castle (aka Donal Grant) in Nairobi. On his return to the UK he sought out the original text and is now a MacDonald fan!

13. **Book Section.**
   i) St. Paul’s Bibliographies, who have published Raphael Shaberman’s George MacDonald: a bibliography in their Nineteenth-Century Writers series, are offering a 15% discount to members of the Society. Normal price is £65 for a signed copy: 15% reduction plus postage & packing of £2 comes to a discount price of £57.25. Contact St Paul’s Bibliographies, West End House, 1 Step Terrace, Winchester, Hampshire, SO 22 5BW, UK


   iii) Strathbogie Church in Huntly was built in 1840 on the site of the school attended by George MacDonald. To mark its 150th anniversary a book has been published, entitled The Story of Strathbogie Church. The account of the breakaway by its members from the Parish Church is important background reading for an understanding of the society in which GMD grew up. Cost is £3.50 (inc p&p) or £4.00 for overseas addresses (it will be sent by surface mail). Contact Mr. E MacDonald, Howglen, Gladstone Rd, Huntly, AB54 5BW, UK.

   iv) Andy Johannesen, of California, has bought around 25 volumes of original MacDonald texts, and tells us he purposes to reprint these at a cost and quality that no one can match. We look forward with interest to receiving further details.
14. **The Library.** The Society has acquired a copy of the 1hr BBC video of *The Light Princess*. John Docherty says it is quite good, as such things go, and it can be borrowed from him (9 Medway Dr. Forest Row, East Sussex, RH18 5NU, UK) at £3 for a 2-week loan, postage included. Cheques to be made payable to the George MacDonald Society. Regretfully, books in the Library are for reference only, until such a time as we can establish a loan collection.

15. **Subscriptions.** Members will have received subscription renewal notices with their copies of North Wind. May we take this opportunity to urge you all to fill these in and send them off promptly, thereby saving the Society the cost of further reminders. Subscriptions are still at the very low rate of £6/$15 single; £10/$19 joint; and £9 for overseas members. United States subscribers may if they wish send their subs. to Randall & Emily Tobias, 2528 Glendale Ave, Durham, NC 27704. Otherwise they should send the overseas rate of £9 sterling to Rachel Johnson, 97 Hykeham Rd, Lincoln, LN6 8AD, UK.

16. **Correction to NORTH WIND 5.** It has been brought to our attention that the illustration on p29 of North Wind 5 (1986) is incorrectly ascribed. The Frontispiece to *Alec Forbes of Howglen* was by Arthur Hughes, not his nephew Edward. The other Frontispiece in North Wind 5, by Edward as stated, is all the more interesting in that Edward did very few illustrations for George MacDonald.

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