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A Visit to Huntly September 1990

William Raeper

“It was fine weather till you arrived,” one local remarked as I struggled under a troublesome umbrella in Huntly Square. Rain swept in dense, biting gusts down the dull granite streets. “No one will believe us if we say it didn’t rain!” declared Freda Levson, waving her stick. “Rain will give verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative . . . .”

Rain, in fact, posed no problem for the twenty or so people who had gathered in Huntly to celebrate George MacDonald from 24th to 27th September. It hardly seemed to rain at all, except the skies opened every time we stepped on or off the bus.

The Society members gathered for dinner at the Huntly Hotel, seated at a long, impressive table, on the Monday evening. Some had met before at Bordighera in 1986. Dick MacDonald (George MacDonald’s great-grandson) and his wife Paddy and three of their children had come all the way from California. Dan Hamilton and Glenn Sadler had also travelled from the US. Others had not travelled so far, but after the long train journey, courtesy of British Rail, many of us felt that we had. We were welcomed by Mr James Cullen, the District and Regional Councillor, who wished us a fruitful and successful week.

That week began in earnest the following Tuesday morning with a guided walk round the MacDonald sites in Huntly by Patrick Scott, a local historian. Then we clambered aboard the bus and set out for the Cabrach, the wild mountainous region near Huntly and setting for MacDonald’s novel Castle Warlock. The rugged, treeless hills were no longer blooming with heather, but the harvest was in and golden, stubbled fields lay shorn to the sky, picked at by crows and cattle.

We stopped at Leith Hall for lunch (and to be filmed by Grampian TV). There we toured the house and moved on to afternoon tea. This was a gargantuan banquet prepared by Morag Black at “Greenkirtle,” the house by the railway line just outside Huntly where MacDonald was brought up.

“I didn’t realise,” gasped Malcolm MacDonald (a great-great-grandson of MacDonald and recently qualified as a doctor), “that we’d be eating so much.”

“Eat up, dear boy!” ordered Freda Levson. Malcolm obeyed without a further word. He could see in the eye of his distant cousin that the spirit of

North Wind 9 (1990): 1-4
Mrs. Falconer lived still.

Over the years there have been complaints that Huntly does not honour George MacDonald enough—even that Huntly does not honour George MacDonald at all—but the George MacDonald Society was made abundantly welcome. There was certainly a renewed and receptive enthusiasm to MacDonald the local Huntly man and MacDonald the writer. Journalists appeared from The Times, The Sunday Times and Scotland on Sunday. The local Community Council and, especially, Gordon District Council, threw their full weight behind supporting the week’s events.

Gordon District Council hosted a reception for the Society at the Brander library, where the 1924 MacDonald Centenary Celebrations took place. The Library (surely an appropriate place to hold any event connected with MacDonald), was packed. Speeches were given by Dick MacDonald on behalf of the family, by Sheila Ritchie on behalf of the council, and by William Raeper on behalf of the Society. Freda Levson [2] presented a pastel of Huntly’s signal box. This had been painted by Sir Hugh Casson from the steps of MacDonald’s childhood home. In return the Provost of Gordon District Council made a generous presentation to the Society.

Wednesday morning contrasted Haddo House, an elegant Adam house near Methlick, with Aden Heritage Centre. At Aden, the old agricultural life of the North-east of Scotland is brought to life. The graciousness and splendour of Haddo stood in stark opposition to the poverty of the farming community, vividly illustrated at Aden—aristocrat versus peasant—as in many of MacDonald’s novels.

The same evening Dr David Robb of Dundee University delivered an excellent lecture to a full audience on George MacDonald and his Scottish Heritage. Around 75 people attended, extra chairs had to be put out, and the lecture was one of the highlights of the week.

Thursday was a mild day. The bus drove to Portsoy and Cullen, the setting of MacDonald’s novel Malcolm. The fresh North Sea and sheer, stony coast conjured up a pungent bygone atmosphere.

Afterwards, we visited the Wow o’ Rivven, where James McBey, the fool in MacDonald’s story of the same name, lies under a stone erected to him by the people of Huntly. From Ruthven, we moved to another Kirkyard—at Drumblacle—where so many of the MacDonald family are buried. Drumblacle is a lonely, windswept place and set a reflective mood which carried into the Memorial Service held at Strathbogie Church at five o’clock. Cyril Barnes, a local episcopalian clergyman, preached. “Love of
one’s neighbour,” he said, quoting MacDonald, “is the only escape from the
dungeon of self.”

The final festivities of what had been a full three days were the
dinner and ceilidh at the Huntly Hotel. Jake Forbes and his band, armed
with fiddle, sax and accordian, treated us to a spicy variety of local
music, songs and poems. The evening rose to the crescendo of an exhausting
eightsome reel which left many, literally, reeling.

The George MacDonald Society visit to Huntly was more than just
a visit—it was the laying of an important foundation. Links were forged
with the local councils and local individuals—links that will last. The
Society hopes to raise a memorial tablet to George and Louisa MacDonald
at Drumblade and hopes, perhaps, to work towards a museum in Huntly
which will include a George MacDonald room. Finally, at the ceilidh, Mr.
Hughes, manager of the Huntly Hotel, offered to institute a generous George
MacDonald prize at the local Gordon Schools.

“Are you doing this next year?” someone asked.

“Maybe not quite next year,” replied Margaret Richardson, one of the
main organisers of the visit.

Yet, while this was only the Society’s first visit to Huntly as a society,
everyone was in agreement that it would by no means be the last. [4]