1997

Orts 44, 1997

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/vol44/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.
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held at St Stephen's Church, Westbourne Park Road, London W2 on Friday October 31st at 7.15pm. for 7.30. St Stephen's is near the eastern end of Westbourne Park Road, a few hundred yards from Royal Oak Stn., which is on the Hammersmith and City Line. Turn left out of the station and Westbourne Park Road is the second turning on the right.

Most of the current members of the Council of the Society are standing for re-election in their present posts, but Phil Streeter is standing down as Committee Chairman, and pressure of work forces Rachel Johnson to resign, giving up her post of Membership Secretary/ Treasurer. Richard Lines has been proposed as Committee Chairman. He works as a company solicitor. Since he joined the Committee a year ago, his extensive knowledge of the literary/philosophical milieu in which MacDonald lived and worked has proved invaluable to the Society. Vivienne Forrest has been proposed as Membership Secretary/Treasurer. When living in Scotland she published articles on MacDonald in several popular journals. She has been on the Council since she moved to London several years ago. Richard Lines is anxious that the post of Chairman should not be held by the same person for more than three or four consecutive years and it will be necessary, sometime in the coming year, to hold an E.G.M. to make the necessary change to the Society's Constitution.

We had hoped that after the short business meeting John Heath-Stubbs would be able to give us a selection of his poems, as he did so successfully at an AGM a few years ago. Unfortunately he cannot do so on this occasion, so John Docherty will attempt to give some helpful advice on "Reading MacDonald's Faerie Romances." Both Phantastes and Lilith bewildered critics when they were first published, because the conventions which MacDonald follows had by then become neglected. The situation is further confused for the modern reader because the most widely-read editions contain a preface made up of disjointed fragments of comments by C.S. Lewis which refer primarily to MacDonald's novels, which in most respects are very differently constructed from the romances. As well as exploring what MacDonald termed the 'intellectual structure' and 'spiritual framework' of the romances, there will hopefully be time to look at how MacDonald's friends responded to Phantastes.

News Items

Exhibition of "Victorian Fairy Painting" at the Royal Academy—13 November 1997 to 8
February 1998, 10 am. to 6 pm. daily.

This will be, in most ways, a striking contrast to the Academy's current "Sensation" exhibition, although some Victorian fairy-paintings are among the most disturbing images created during that period. The exhibition should help people understand the contemporary background to MacDonald's various accounts of supernatural beings. However, too much must not be expected because MacDonald is far more precise in his descriptions than nearly all his contemporaries. Moreover, in *Phantastes* he describes an exceptional number of different classes of beings.

'One section of the exhibition illustrates the development of stage effects in theatre and ballet with designs for costumes and stage scenery.' Hopefully book illustrations, including some of Arthur Hughes' splendid drawings or *At the Back of the North Wind* and the *Curdie* books, will also be part of the exhibition. Hughes unfortunately did not illustrate *Phantastes* until 1905, when interest in faerie folk had diminished. The goblins and flower fairies he depicts there are banal in the extreme, and moreover they fail to correspond with MacDonald's descriptions.

Some present-day descriptions of encounters with fairies, purporting to be factual, are indistinguishable from Anodos' encounters in the forest cottage in *Phantastes*. Readers must decide for themselves whether such parallels represent plagiarism or near-identical experiences! With two such published accounts I happen to know the writers personally and can rule out conscious plagiarism. But in one instance the ladies' experience was of an ash ogre menacing a cottage, and where Anodos describes the same event MacDonald obviously wishes us to realise that it is merely twigs of the ash tree which are mistaken for the ogre's fingers. So the parallel modern experience is very unlikely to be anything other than unconscious plagiarism.

---


This second volume of Dorothy Sayers' letters, edited by Barbara Reynolds, has just been published by Carole Green Publishing of Cambridge. It covers a period when Dorothy Sayers had become a figure of national influence and importance.

---

John Heath-Stubbs eightieth birthday, 1998

To mark this occasion, Carcanet Press of Manchester are publishing a collection of John Heath Stubbs' major literary essays. This will be the fifth collection of his essays published by Carcanet, who also publish his Collected Poems. The essays 'consider many of the great English poets from Spenser to the present day.'

---

No more Civil List pensions
One of the first radical moves of the new Labour government in Britain was to arrange to abolish the Civil List. So no more struggling writers will receive a lifeline like the modest Civil List pension which Queen Victoria awarded to MacDonald.


Peter Gauld, at The Basement Press, Basement Flat, 29, Burrell Rd. IPSWICH, IP2 8AH, has produced a new edition of The Golden Key with twelve of his own wood engravings-limited edition of 150 copies h.b. quarter-bound. It is obtainable from Peter Gauld at £26 including p&p.

![One of the plates from the Basement Press edition of *The Golden Key*](image)

The quality of reproduction is of course far superior in the book. Details such as the form of the rainbow and Mossy's apparent age differ startlingly from the text, and if this is typical of all the plates it is a great pity. But the book seems good value at £26.

The best loved children's books.

Waterstones the booksellers have followed up their much publicised survey to discover the most popular book of the century in Britain (unsurprisingly it turned out to be *The Lord of the Rings*) by conducting a similar survey to discover the most popular children's books. The results of these surveys seem to be generally accepted as reliable. Waterstones compiled three lists: adults' choices, children's choices, and overall choices. Unsurprisingly, the first two lists are very different. Despite repeated requests, it has proved impossible to obtain from Waterstones more than the top twenty listings in each category. So the positions achieved by MacDonald's children's books is not known. Information about some lower listings can be gleaned from a half-page article in *The Times* of September 1st, but MacDonald is not mentioned there either. The only British work of the nineteenth century in the 'first twenty' listings is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* at number nine in the overall list.

The most encouraging evidence to emerge from the survey is that children much prefer moral-imaginative works to 'gritty realism' or 'horror', the two fiction categories currently must extensively plugged by publishers. The overall winner was Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, a politically highly incorrect story of 'a super intelligent [child who is] a voracious reader of challenging literature [and who] is driven to acts of mischief by her frustration at being saddled with semi-literate, couch-potato parents.'
Literary centenaries commemorated by postage stamps

Somehow or other, Enid Blyton appears on the Waterstones lists mentioned above! Presumably-as the *Times* children's books reviewer suggests-she 'bludgeons her way into the top 100 . . . by sheer force of having written more than 700 lilies.' Yet her book *The Faraway Tree* is honoured on the current 43p. postage stamp! If Enid Blyton can be honoured by a stamp, it will be far from extravagant for the MacDonald Society to press for a full set of stamps to commemorate the MacDonald centenary in 2005!

1997 North Wind

For 1997, *North Wind* has a guest editor, Professor Gutteridge, an English academic currently living and working in British Columbia. The journal will be printed in North America, but will be distributed from Britain and should appear as usual in November. For this occasion it is being printed, not photocopied, so a small print-run would be uneconomic. Thus spare copies will be available at comparatively low cost for members who would like to introduce the journal to their friends.

MacDonald web sites and e-mail bulletin

Katheryn Lindskoog's fine article on MacDonald and Mark Twain from The Mark Twain Journal, volume 30, has now been added to Mike Partridge's MacDonald web site at http://ds.dial.pipex.com/partridge/md_index.htm. The book currently being studied by contributors to his e-mail bulletin is The Portent, but other MacDonald material is of course welcome concurrently. The address is partridge@dial.pipex.com


‘AS LIKE ALBERTE DURER’S *MELANCOLIA* AS SHE COULD LOOK’

This is the description given to the presiding 'angel' of the New Jerusalem in the first draft of MacDonald's *Lilith* (page 387 of the Johannesen edition). As Roderick McGillis has noted, MacDonald gradually removed helps for the reader from successive drafts of *Lilith*, and in the final version the overt allusion to Durer is omitted, but the description (absent from the first draft) of 'a woman-angel of dark visage, leaning her shadowed brow on her idle hand' (261) will still suggest the *Melancolia* to anyone who knows the etching. At first there seems no reason whatsoever why this angel should resemble Durer's *Melancolia*. MacDonald, however, possessed
a rare facsimile copy of Blake’s *Jerusalem*. And, for depicting his character Vala as the presiding female figure of the New Jerusalem of the Diests, Blake seems to draw consciously upon the posture, complexion, features, and introspective expression of Durer's *Melancolia*.

Among various negative symbols in this etching note the sunflower mimicking a lotus rising from water, and the wings of Vala's throne, which at first sight look like wings of her own and which almost completely obscure the rays of the true sun.

Erdman, in *The Illuminated Blake*, describes Vala here as 'the high priestess of Deism or State Religion.' The allusion to this negative image in the middle of Vane's description of his dream of a pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem is very important, because most writers have assumed that MacDonald intends Vane's account of the pilgrimage as unambiguously positive (except for the one detail of the Little Ones' deplorable baby-talk when they first see God). But, in fact, almost every detail of his pilgrimage is ambivalent. For example, the mighty male angel who conscripts the Little Ones to fight against 'a horde of black bats' is an equally ambivalent figure. In the first draft he is named Cacourgos Heteros, and caco (as in cacophony) derives from a Greek word meaning 'in the shit.'
All the ambivalence in this episode is examined in the completely rewritten *Lilith* chapter in the second edition of *The Literary Fruits of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship*, due to be published in October 1997. The chapter on Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* books is also largely re-written to emphasise how these volumes are imaginative biography of Carroll's relationship with the MacDonals, structured primarily as a parody of *Adela Cathcart*. The *Phantastes* chapter and the chapter on MacDonald's shorter fairy stories have been revised to take into account Adrian Gunther's recent researches. Thus these chapters now place far more emphasis upon the spiritual aspects of the stories.

---

**A VARIORUM EDITION OF LILITH**

The variorum edition of *Lilith*, begun with the publication by the Johannesens in 1994 of the first and final versions of the book, has now been completed. Johannesens have just brought out—in two volumes, uniform in format with *Lilith: First & Final*—the uncorrected versions of all the intermediate drafts, edited by Rolland Hein. The price of the two volumes together is $52 (£32.50) including p & p. They are obtainable direct from the Johannesens in America and from Rachel Johnson in Europe, or from any good bookseller.

The crucial importance of studying original drafts of a major work whenever possible is emphasised by MacDonald in *There and Back*. In most instances it is unsafe to regard the opinions of any of MacDonald's characters as more or less identical with his own. But when Richard Lestrange, the hero of *There and Back*, speaks about this matter, what he says is undoubtedly close to MacDonald's views. The passage is so important that it deserves reproducing in extensio. Richard is describing "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to the heroine Barbara Wylder.

The volume containing it had come into his hands as one of a set his father had to bind . . . . There he read first the final form of The Rime as it appeared in the Sibyline leaves of 1817; when he came to look at that in the lyrical Ballads, published in 1798, he found differences many and great between the two. He found also in the set an edition with a form of the poem differing considerably from the last as well as the first. He had brought together and compared all these forms of the poem, noting every minutest variation—a mode of study which, in the case of a masterpiece, richly repays the student.

Barbara asks him:

'[S]urely the printers, with all their blunders and changes, can't keep you from seeing what the author wrote!'

'The editions I mean are those of the author himself. He kept making changes, some of them very great changes. Not many people know the poem as Coleridge first published it. . . .'

'Did he make it better?'

'Much better.'

'They why should you care any more for the first way of it?'
'Just because it is different. A thing not so good may have a different goodness. A man may not be as good as another man, and yet have some good things in him the other has not. That implies that not every change he made was for the better. And where he has put a better phrase, or passage, the former may yet be good. So you see a new form may be much better, and yet the old form remains much too good to be parted with. In any case it is intensely interesting to see how and why he changed a thing or its shape, and to ponder wherein it is for the better or the worse. There follows a wonderfully lucid analysis of the evolution of some of the most important verses in the poem, although only Barbara at first comprehends the poem's overall structure.

The importance MacDonald attaches to an understanding of the gradual genesis of a masterpiece confirms how much he would have detested the reverse process which occurs when such a book is rewritten!

________________________

**SOME NEW INFORMATION ON THE EARLY LIFE OF GEORGE MACDONALD**

by

Dr J.A.D. Finlayson, Isle of Harris

Despite the plethora of biographies about MacDonald in the past decade, little information seems available on his early life. Most works accept uncritically MacDonald's own account in his novels and in his son's biography.

Bidgeon Books, a small private Scottish press, (12 Torgomack, Beauly, Inverness-shire) has recently reprinted the very rare *Memoirs of William Collie: A 19th Century Deerstalker*. This autobiographical account is of a man born in 1829 in Glen Feshie near the present-day resort of Aviemore, who eventually became a gamekeeper in a deer forest north west of Inverness. He subsequently emigrated to Canada where he died in 1910. In exile he wrote his memoirs which were printed in Australia where his family had settled. It is a fascinating work, as there have been many books written by estate owners but few by their workers.

Collie's account of 19th century deer management is of little interest to most people now but he does have some fascinating information on Highland society of that time. What will be of particular interest to readers of *Orts* is the information he gives on George MacDonald. He says that he was a cousin of George MacDonald.

Readers will doubtless recall that George MacDonald claimed to be descended from the MacDonals of Glencoe. Collie says that the Collies were descended from the two sons, John and Alexander MacDonald, sons of Maclain the chief of the MacDonals of Glencoe, who escaped being massacred with their fellow clansmen in 1692.

Collie tells of his family tradition, that the two sons fled the massacre, going by the Spey to Morayshire where they obtained work from a farmer. For obvious reasons they refused to give their full names, but the farmer, becoming inquisitive, insisted upon their names being given. According to Collie's account one brother said: 'well I don't care what you call me, call me Collie if you like,' at that touching with his foot a collie sheepdog lying close to him. 'Collie you will be then,' said the old farmer. The brothers settled in Morayshire, both married and had offspring. As
time went on the name MacDonald was no longer one to be ashamed of, and one branch of the family returned to the name of MacDonald. Alexander Collie could remember as a child his parents give their genealogical lists and was always aware that George MacDonald's father was a fairly close relative. He says that in his family George MacDonald Snr was always known as Collach crubach (Gaelic for crippled Collie). He had never met the man, but of course George MacDonald's father had lost a leg and the name would be fully appropriate. There are some inaccuracies in Collie's account. For example, he says that MacDonald Snr was a saw-miller whereas he was a meal-miller.

Collie met George MacDonald on two occasions when MacDonald visited Collie's father on Speyside. Fascinatingly he says this was in 1843, which was of course the period when MacDonald's whereabouts had always been a considerable mystery. Collie describes George MacDonald as a very unusual person. Interestingly he describes him as an enthusiast, the term used almost invariably by Scotsmen of previous times to describe a person of pious Calvinistic bent.

Collie says that the reason MacDonald came to Speyside was to try to persuade Collie's father to change his name back to MacDonald. He was unsuccessful in persuading his less romantic cousin to do this, but apparently they remained firm friends and corresponded for some time. It would be interesting to know if any trace of this correspondence remains.

Collie gives an amusing anecdote of MacDonald on his own in the parlour of the house in vigorous discourse, as if in argument with an unseen audience. Collie's father was not present and other members of the house got a great fright, to the subsequent amusement of MacDonald and Collie Snr.

After a second visit MacDonald travelled over the hills to Huntly accompanied part of the way by Collie's father. Those who know the high Cairngorms will know that this journey was through a sad and splendid landscape, one that I am sure recurred to MacDonald in his aged exile in Italy. There is of course the possibility that Collie may have made the whole thing up. However, on reading his book he comes across as a most careful and indeed punctilious man. His account of his contact with MacDonald is reported in a very matter-of-fact way. Some people may be sceptical of the accuracy of claimed relationships on the basis of family memories, but as a Highlander I know how important these things are and how they are kept up from generation to generation. The Highlander has a fierce pride in genealogy and, in the past without any other means of entertainment, going over the ancestry (the slionnadh) was a favourite way of passing the time, and as a result a high degree of accuracy could be ensured.

The Collie relationship might also cast some light as to why the MacDonald family were associated with the missioner church in Huntly. It took a great deal at that time to get a Scotsman to leave the national church, but if you recall that the name of the minister at the missioner kirk in Huntly was Collie, then this might explain why the MacDonald family worshipped there rather than at the parish church.

Perhaps readers with more knowledge of MacDonald's life than I have will be able to reject Collie's account, but I think it might give a further beam of light on this most fascinating of men.
MACDONALD IN AMERICA

Most of the comments we have on the sermons MacDonald gave in America come from newspaper reporters or from his personal friends. But here is a comment by the most famous preacher of his day in America, Phillip Brooks, from his *Lectures on Preaching*, 1887, pages 15-16. It was discovered by Alan Stott.

The minstrel who sings before you to show his skill will be praised for his wit, and rhymes, and voice. But the courier who hurries in, breathless, to bring you a message, will be forgotten in the message that he brings. Among the many sermons I have heard, I always remember one, for the wonderful way in which it was pervaded by this quality. It was a sermon by Mr George MacDonald, the English author, who was in this country a few years ago; and it had many of the good and bad characteristics of his interesting style. It had his brave and manly honesty, and his tendency to sentimentality. But over and through it all it had this quality: it was a message from God to these people by him. The man struggled with language as a child struggles with his imperfectly mastered tongue, that will not tell the errand as he received it, and has it in his mind. As I listened, I seemed to see how weak in contrast was the way other preachers had amused me and challenged my admiration for the working of their minds. Here was a gospel. Here were real tidings. And you listened and forgot the preacher.

REWRITES OF MACDONALD'S NOVELS - LETTER FROM HUGH O'BRIEN

No reasonable person could fail to be general agreement with the comments expressed in *Orts* 43 upon rewrites of MacDonald's books. After all, no other major nineteenth century writer has been treated in this way. However, some readers may feel that not all rewrites of the novels must necessarily be inferior to the originals. *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*, for example, is so bad as literature that I can imagine many people saying to themselves 'I could do better than that!' The book has splendid passages of Christian homily of course, so not a few people might consider reshaping the story into a more acceptable framework for MacDonald's Christian teaching. But they would soon find that such a task involved more rewriting than they had anticipated.

Many features of this book cry out for improvement: its total lack of humour; the obsessive and wholly inconsistent attitude towards class snobbery; the absurdly improbable coincidences; the examples of out-of-character speech (such as Bascombe's weak logic when arguing with his cousin, and Wingfold's pomposity when addressing his parishioners in his sermons); the curious succession of the seasons with summer flowers appearing before spring flowers; the type-casting of the murderer as a drug-crazed half-cast; and so on and so on.

The implications behind the picture MacDonald builds up of the murderer's victim, Emmeline, are especially disturbing. She is depicted as a wholly deplorable person, yet we later learn that the blame for this must be laid upon her even more deplorable mother. It is Emmeline's murder
which makes possible the spiritual development through suffering of her murderer, Leopold, through him of his half-sister Helen and the curate, and (spiralling out still further) through Wingfold of some of his congregation. MacDonald's clumsy handling of this spiritual growth cannot diminish its splendour. But from one crucial aspect the splendour is like that of a soap-bubble: Emmeline herself is debarred by death from being able to participate in it. MacDonald believes passionately that the primary purpose of earth existence is to give us the opportunity to develop spiritually. Yet he feels obliged to imagine Emmeline having grown to a state of glory in heaven. He fails to realise that if she has been able to progress spiritually as much or more than the earth-bound characters, then earth-existence is superfluous. It becomes as meaningless as Helen believes it to be for most of the story.

The most common and most powerful argument against the various forms of censorship of MacDonald's books is the inevitable loss of quality involved in the censoring of the better books. Examination of *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* shows that even MacDonald's bad books cannot be improved by such censorship.

**Editor's reply**

The rewriters of MacDonald's novels are in general far less ambitious than Hugh O'Brien believes, and it is remarkable that he did not look alone of these rewrites. The aims of the abridger are lucidly explained in the introduction to *The Curate's Awakening*—Michael Phillips retelling (his term) of *Thomas Wingfold*:

> In each of [MacDonald's] books, different facets of his vision of God's character emerge. Through no single one do we obtain the complete scope of MacDonald's perception of God, yet each contributes to the total picture . . . .

> Thomas was a shallow man with no personal faith, a man who plagiarised his [sic] sermons, a man with little personality, unequipped to occupy the pulpit and still less to lead even the humblest of his parishioners.

> And yet in spite of all this, . . . Wingfold possessed the one quality which MacDonald revered above nearly all others—openness . . . .

> With this openness came an honest heart, one willing to take a thorough look at whatever new presented itself. Might there indeed be truth present? In the character of Wingfold we see a host of qualities which accompany openness—humility, a willingness to admit oneself ignorant, a lack of airs, an absence of defences. Thomas had no walls standing between his true self and the outside world, no predisposition to argue or justify or defend or show where another was in the wrong.

Michael Phillips here has extracted the true 'spiritual scaffolding' of the story. He then equally lucidly summarises its 'intellectual structure':

> Intrinsic to the open mind and heart, MacDonald clarifies the vital and necessary role of doubt. The open mind, he insists, has the courage to voice uncertainties and to seek logical and reasonable and scriptural answers-answers compatible with God's character.
. . *The Curate's Awakening* directly confronts the most basic of questions: Is Christianity true? Does it make sense? Are its precepts to be believed? Or is it a hoax?

In the first draft of *Lilith*, in the account of Fane's efforts with the Lilliputians, MacDonald gives an allegorical picture of his own endless struggles to impart even the most basic spiritual truths. Surely, therefore, he would have been glad to know that his evangelical novels could reach a wide twentieth century audience if stripped of accessory details? It is true that in some of the novels there is an important sub-plot. But these sub-plots are so covert that he clearly did not expect the vast majority of his readers to perceive them-and the sort of readers who might perceive them would always go straight to unexpurgated editions. In any case, such sub-plots appear to be absent from the Wingfold trilogy, although Kathy Triggs (in *North Wind 6*) has uncovered strands or symbolism particularly developed in the middle volume: *Paul Faber, Surgeon*. The various digressions in the Wingfold trilogy seem to be little more than MacDonald's technique for avoiding being driven mad through being obliged to expound basic spiritual truths at such extreme length! It is sad that many picturesque and apt phrases, which Michael Phillips apparently feels might cause some American readers a moment's hesitation, are replaced by utterly banal alternatives. But there is very little other re-writing in the book apart from brief summaries of some omitted passages. And Phillips is, in general, careful not to delete any essential material, although it would have been helpful if he had not abridged the already brief personal descriptions of the principal characters.

Most of the infelicities in Thomas Wingfold noted by Hugh O'Connor could not be rectified without extensive rewriting of the story. Moreover, such features as the social snobbery, and the irrational conception of the relationship between spiritual striving on Earth and the nature of life after death, were all-pervasive at the time when MacDonald wrote, so it would destroy the credibility of the hook to attempt to modify them.

The clearly stated principles which govern Michael Phillips' rewrites cannot easily be refuted. Hugh O'Connor is surely correct in pointing out that while we may deplore rewrites of MacDonald's novels on the grounds that their literary value is thus destroyed, this objection is valid only where the novels possess appreciable literary value! The reason they do not all possess real literary value is apparently because evidence available to MacDonald suggested that time spent improving the literary quality of his evangelical novels would not be justified by any proportionate increase in their influence.