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The George MacDonald Society

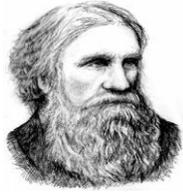
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Orts

The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 45, Winter 1997

1998 OXFORD SUMMER CONFERENCE

Various unexpected events have delayed the final planning of this Conference. As a consequence it has not yet been possible to circulate full details. However the Conference is still planned to take place at Westminster College, Oxford from June 26th-28th.

Firm bookings are not required at this stage, but it is essential that anyone who hopes to be able to contribute, or simply to attend, and who has not yet contacted the organisers, should as soon as possible inform Stratford Caldecott at the Centre For Faith and Culture, Westminster College, OXFORD, OX2 9AT.

Submissions are welcome upon any topic relevant to the writings of both MacDonald and Chesterton. So far, interest has focused primarily upon MacDonald's Wise Woman figures in their Christian aspects, and it is likely that the final title chosen will reflect this.

For Sale

A few copies of the Eerdmans edition of *Phantastes*, obtained during Gracewing's stock-moving sale, are still available at only £3, plus 45p for U.K. postage.

There are also still some of the Christmas cards available which were designed by a MacDonald enthusiast working at a mission near Bullawayo. They fit a standard C6 envelope. The suggested price is 10p each. Please send a cheque made out to OXFAM, plus stamps for postage (30 cards weigh 190 gms), to 9 Medway Drive, FOREST ROW, RH18 5NU.

The Officers of the MacDonald Society

At the A.G.M. in October, Richard Lines was appointed as Chairman of the Committee and Vivenne Forrest as Membership Secretary/Treasurer. The other Committee Members were re-elected, although it remains uncertain whether Tim Braithwaite will be able to resume his role of *Orts* editor.

We thought that members unable to attend meetings might like to see photographs of the officers of the Society, even though photographs do not reproduce very well with the reprographic process employed for *Orts*. Here are the first batch!

left - Vivenne Forrest
centre - Richard Lines
right - John Docherty
& William Webb



Apologies etc.

We must apologise for mis-spelling the name of the preacher Philips Brooks in *Orts* 44, and also for twice mis-spelling Hugh O'Connor's name as Hugh O'Brien!

The piece in *Orts* 44 on the *Variorum Edition of Lilith*, was written before we had seen copies. Immediately upon examining the two volumes it became evident that its value far surpasses what we had anticipated. Truly this will be a pearl of great price for anyone inspired by MacDonald's spiritual insights. We quoted from the episode in *There and Back*, where the hero emphasises the importance of studying early drafts of major works of literature. We apologise to Elizabeth McDonalds Weinrich for not acknowledging that she quotes from this same passage in her Introduction to the volumes. We were all that time wholly unaware of her prior use of the quotation.

Rachel Johnson's review in *Orts* 43 of Glenn Sadler's account of his work upon MacDonald's letters is predominately highly appreciative. Yet it has occasioned a surprisingly abusive published response from a Sadler fan. No specific aspects of Mrs. Johnson's review are mentioned, so it is impossible to guess what has caused offence.

Review

Journey to the Celestial City, ed. Wayne Martindale, Chicago: Moody. pp.143, h/b.

The publishers, an evangelical press, approached Wheaton College with the proposal for this book. But it seems their resources did not match up to their remarkably ambitious plans.

The chosen 'literary figures' who have explored the title theme are amongst 'the world's greatest writers . . . Augustine, Dante, Bunyan, Milton', and so on. In their essays on these figures, Martindale's distinguished contributors do their best to fulfil impossible demands, but they could have achieved much more had adequate space been available, particularly for quotations. Contributing writers are permitted no more than 6,000 words to fulfil no less than thirteen specific demands as to coverage. Additionally, they were apparently expected to include a review of their chosen author's whole oeuvre, with quotations, plus a plot-synopsis of their chosen book!

Although only two contributions are directly related to MacDonald, to a spiritual pilgrim all the essays should prove valuable.

The editor retains the easiest task. He chooses to write upon C.S. Lewis, whose aims—particularly in *The Great Divorce*, the work chosen for analysis—can be effectively summarised in the brief space allowed. Martindale's is somewhat premature in including Lewis in amongst 'the world's greatest writers'. Should this not be for posterity to decide? (H.B. Stowe, another selected author, although at her best a fine writer, is likewise not yet acknowledged a place among the immortals.)

The Great Divorce is, of course, of particular interest to MacDonald enthusiasts because Lewis depicts MacDonald as his guide. Martindale, in a list of further reading appended to his essay, recommends critics as diverse in religious outlook as Thomas Howard and Colin Manlove. Yet his own criticism is narrower in outlook. This is most evident where he seeks to deny the possibility of any form of purgatory, claiming that Lewis allows "'the 'hellians' to journey to heaven and stay if they want [s]imply to stress (1) that we choose our eternal destinies and (2) that by our life choices we turn ourselves into beings suited for one or the other.'" Obviously these have to be Lewis' primary motives, since he is writing for living human beings.

But he refines MacDonald's views as expressed in *Lilith* and has MacDonald explain that if souls "leave that grey town [Hell] behind it will not have been Hell. To any that leaves it, it is Purgatory." Martindale recognises that Heaven and Hell are reflected in human beings on Earth as states of mind, yet he cannot accept this for Purgatory. As well as being untrue to Lewis, and still more so to MacDonald, this an illogical attitude.

Lewis snipes at William Blake, and Martindale seizes the chance to amplify this. So he inverts Blake's dictum that 'Without Contraries is no Progression' and claims Blake believed 'that opposites must marry before progress is possible'.

Lewis frequently oversimplifies matters to press home a crucial message. In *The Great Divorce* his most urgent message is that throughout life, at virtually every moment, we have to choose between good and evil. Martindale insists that at these times reality inevitably presents us with an either-or choice. In fact, we are much more often called upon to avoid being captured by one or other of *two* diametrically opposite evils—a situation allegorised by Homer in his depiction of Scylla and Charybdis; reappearing as Sin and Death in Milton, and as beast and demon in Yeats.

Martindale ingeniously suggests that Christ is the bus-driver who brings the souls up from Hell in Lewis' story, reflecting numerous religious paintings of the Harrowing of Hell. But, as only two of the souls who take the trip feel inclined to remain in Heaven, this interpretation implies atypically harsh irony on Lewis' part. Lewis derives his initial description of the driver from Dante's description of the angel in *Inferno* canto 9. And the task of that angel is to facilitate Dante's very different route to Heaven through Nether Hell.

Rolland Hein has to write on both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* in only 3,000 words! His brief account of Anodos' prodigal path in *Phantastes* is extraordinarily successful. He notes that '[t]here is much in [it] that is enigmatic and difficult to interpret.' In view of the prefatory quotations from Novalis on the nature of fairy tales this is to be expected. But the ambivalence is wholly in what MacDonald, in his essay on "The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture" terms the 'spiritual scaffolding'. *Phantastes* resembles many authors' first novels in being crowded with literary allusions and autobiographical references. Once these are recognised, nothing of what MacDonald terms the 'intellectual structure' remains enigmatic.

Hein also achieves a surprising degree of success with *Lilith*. It is surprising because *Lilith*, to a far greater extent than *Phantastes*, is not a work to be comprehended by 'interpreting' it. Hein however mixes up MacDonald's opposite hells of the Bad Burrow and the Evil Wood, apparently because, like Martindale, he does not acknowledge the opposite faces of evil. In the Evil Wood phantoms in human form materialise out of the air, whereas the Burrow is a desert swamp where monsters rise from the ground. He similarly confuses the battling skeletons in the Evil Wood with dancers in a forest hall. Vane's mentor Mr Raven unambiguously describes these dancers as being in a state of purgatory, although he does not use this actual term. Yet Hein refers to them as 'damned souls'! This is particularly unfortunate because, as Dale Nelson has observed, the encounter of the Little Ones with the dancers is one of the most wonderful episodes in all fantasy literature, and it completely loses *frisson* if the dancers are indeed damned. Hein describes the Little Ones as 'often bungling and ineffectual. MacDonald is making reference to professing religious people . . . who have not yet come into true spiritual maturity.' This is true of the 'dwarfs' in the first version of the story, but not really appropriate as a description of the Little Ones who replace them in the final version. Nor is it Lona who snatches the Little Ones from Lilith's city, as Hein states.

Hein leaves it to the reader to decide whether Vane's experiences after he has finally lain down to sleep in Eve's house are a dream of a post-death experience or a 'dying into life' which is independent of physical death. All the 'sleepers' there whom Vane has previously noticed are people who have already died a physical death in the everyday world, but what MacDonald intends by this is not easy to determine. The way the house is sometimes referred to as Adam's cemetery and sometimes as Eve's house seems to imply two diametrically opposed ways of looking at life and death, and neither of these seems related to Vane's initial conception of death. Thus Hein is acting with proper caution in not committing himself to any one interpretation of the final phase of the story.

MacDonald in 'old age'

William Webb recently found the following allusion to MacDonald in *A Religious Rebel: The Letters of Mrs H. Pearsall Smith* edited by her son Logan Pearsall Smith, London: Nisbit, 1949. Hannah Tatum Pearsall Smith (née Whittall) was born in Pennsylvania and lived mainly in England. She was a Quaker

11 Sept. 1893 - Friday's Hill - to friends

We have had another most honoured guest since I wrote my last letter, and that is George MacDonald who came with his wife and two daughters. He is the dearest old man, so gentle and yet so strong, and with such a marvellous insight into spiritual things. He is like an old patriarch who embraces the whole world as his family, and spreads hands of blessing over all But he has been very ill and seems much more feeble than I have ever known him. He thinks he has a slight stroke of paralysis, but his wife will not listen to this, and says it has only been nervous prostration from overwork. I expect, however, that he is growing old like the rest of us and there is nothing to grieve over in this. He has done a beautiful work in the world, and it is only fair that now he should have a little prospect of rest.

It is almost inconceivable today in the West that a person aged under seventy could be likened to 'an old patriarch', yet a generation earlier MacDonald was referring to his father as 'that grand old man' before he had turned sixty!

Newspapers and the C.S. Lewis Centenary

The Times of London this summer carried a correspondence on the wardrobe in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. A flippant entry in the "Diary" column on 28 July prompted a letter published on 31 July, which put forward as a new discovery the similarity between the children's entry into an unknown snowy world through fur coats in a wardrobe in Lewis' story and that in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Nutcracker and Mouse King." Yet this, as many members will recall, was noted as long ago as 1988 by Raphael Shaberman in our journal *North Wind*. On 13 August letters were published tracing the origin of the wardrobe to Edith Nesbit's *The Magic World* and to MacDonald's *Lilith* [sic]. The last letter in particular was full of inaccuracies, and both our Chairman, Richard Lines, and our Librarian, John Docherty, felt obliged to write corrections. These were published on 23 August.

This correspondence was a precursor of the sort of thing we must expect on an almost daily basis in one newspaper or another during the Lewis centenary year 1998. Minor errors in local newspapers may scarcely seem to warrant correction, but a published correction does make

readers aware of MacDonald and the MacDonald Society, and several new members usually join the Society as a result. If you see any letters or articles which require correction and you feel you can respond positively, please do so! When you think the Society ought to respond formally, please contact us as quickly as possible, preferably by fax to 01342 823859.

A new Australian publishing venture

We recently received the flyer reproduced below from Nimrod Publications, PO Box 1 70, NEW LAMBTON, NSW 2305, Australia.

BABEL HANDBOOKS on Fantasy and SF Writers ISSN 1326-561X

General Editor, Norman Talbot

BABEL HANDBOOKS is delighted to introduce a new series of studies of fantasy and science fiction writers. Each handbook includes a reliable and up-to-date bibliography. First titles July 1997. The writers may be selected from any period and country, though special emphasis is placed on Australian writers and the interests of Australian readers. All authors have chosen as their topic a writer they consider to be of exceptional quality.

First Series:

- 1** *David Lake* Darwin and Doom: H.G.WELLS and The Time Machine*
- 2** *Norman Talbot* Betwixt Wood-Woman, Wolf and Bear:
The Heroic-Age Romances of WILLIAM MORRIS*
- 3** *Yvonne Rousseau* Minmers Marooned and the Planet of the Marsupials:
The Science Fiction Novels of CHERRY WILDER*
- 4** *Rosaleen Love* MICHAEL FRAYN and the Fantasy of Everyday Life*
- 5** *Sylvia Kelso* A Glance from Nowhere:
SHERI S. TEPPER's Fantasy and SF*
- 6** *Cath Filmer-Davies*. The Fantasy Fiction of C.S.LEWIS
- 7** *David Connell* Beyond the Eternal Champion:
Fantasies of MICHAEL MOORCOCK
- 8** *Russell Blackford* Hyperdreams:
DAMIEN BRODERICK's Space/Time Fiction
- 9** *Janeen Webb* GUY GAVRIEL KAY
- 10** *Justine Larbalstier* on TANITH LEE
- 11** *Rhona Beare* on J.R.R.TOLKIEN: The Silmarillion
- 12** *Van Ikin* on TERRY DOWLING
- 13** *Michael Talley* on MERVYN PEAKE: the Gormenghast trilogy

*= available September 1997

Given an encouraging response, a *Second Series* is planned, which may include

Russell Blackford on Greg Egan
Stephen Derry on Lord Lytton: The Coming Race
Cath Filmer-Davies on Lloyd Alexander: The Prydain Pentalogy
John Foyster on Norman Lindsay: The Magic Pudding
Van Ikin on Peter Carey
Yvonne Rousseau on Ursula K. le Guin
Amanda Serrano on Marion Zimmer Bradley
Norman Talbot on William Morris: The Well at the World's End
Michael Tolley on Cordwainer Smith
Andres Vaccari on J.G. Ballard
Janeen Webb on E.R. Eddison

A *Third Series* is in the early planning stage. It may have a stronger American content.

The surprising absence from the lists of any study of MacDonald may be due to the General

Editor's belief that it was William Morris' prose romances which 'introduced the alternative-world fantasy genre that has produced some of the most characteristic, most imaginative and most valued fictions of this century.'

There are several versions of the reverse side of the flyer, but each one includes the paragraphs below.

These critics are celebrants, in the sense that they have chosen as their topic a writer whom they consider to be 'of exceptional quality'. The choice may be from any century or country (the First Series features writers from five English-speaking countries), and encompass writers from any part of the intertwined F&SF genres, including those who write for 'young adult' and child audiences. Any interested subscriber may see a list of all the recommendations so far made for future topics—and indeed suggest additions.

Prices are \$10 per copy; cheques payable to Nimrod Publications. For overseas buyers, international money orders or \$10 American. However, U.K. buyers may, if they prefer, pay £5 sterling, making cheques payable to Norman Talbot.

Please consider subscribing to this new and refreshing enterprise, or at least purchasing copies of the handbooks that particularly interest you—as well as recommending the series to your local libraries and quality bookshops. We're going to need the money to go on beyond this first series.

This seemed a venture to be encouraged, and we purchased an inspection copy of number 2. At 32 pages it is only half the length we had anticipated for the price, and the computer-generated text displays some archaic features, such as underlining in place of italic. Otherwise the presentation is good, and the booklets should certainly be attractive to students and sell well in university bookstores.

The blurb on the cover includes information not mentioned in the flyer:

Babel Handbooks of Fantasy and SF Writers are critical studies of fantasy and science fiction writers in English, each making a case for the quality of one or more of the works of the writer chosen. Biographical material, and debate with critics or schools of criticism, is kept to a minimum. Each handbook contains a reliable bibliography of the author's fantasy, or science fiction, or both, as well as select general and critical bibliographies.

Norman Talbot has a lively style, and he does make a good case for the quality of Morris' Heroic-Age romances. But that is virtually all! After an excellent first paragraph in which we are told that Morris 'utilised radical historical perspectives on heroic-age and dark-age cultures to provide a sharp critique of centralised "civilisation"' we learn virtually nothing about the relationship of the romances to Morris' vast output of socialist-utopian writing. Nor is there any reference to other fantasy writers of the period other than one passing allusion to Morris' mistrust of 'Rider Haggard's saga pastiche *The Saga of Eric Bright Eyes*.' And, as Talbot's plot summaries convey an impression of complexity of detail combined with uniformity of treatment, the booklet is unlikely to recruit many people, other than active Paganists, who might wish to read the books merely for pleasure. Thus it is difficult to recognise what class of reader would find the handbook useful.

Morris' fiction is perhaps less accessible than that of most of the other authors in the series. But if the other handbooks keep to the prescribed format it is likely that they too are of limited value. We would like to know if readers find any of the handbooks helpful to them.

A Cheshire Cat in Lagobel?

Most readers will be familiar with the splendid editions of *The Light Princess* and *The Golden Key* illustrated by Maurice Sendak. These illustrations follow the texts closely



except for one striking exception. In the illustration of the christening of the baby princess in *The Light Princess*, a huge detached cat's head floats over the characters, just as in John Tenniel's illustration of the croquet game in Lewis Carroll's 1865 story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Tenniel, of course, is following Carroll's text. But bodiless cats are exceptionally rare in literature and none appear in MacDonald's story. So there seems little doubt that Sendak is alluding to Carroll's Cheshire Cat, even though his cat's head is puzzled, not grinning. Sendak has probably read Carroll's diaries published in abridged form in 1953. Only a few days after where Carroll notes having composed the draft chapter headings to begin his first written version of "Alice's Adventures . ." there is an entry where he describes MacDonald showing him the Arthur Hughes illustrations for *The Light Princess*. But this alone scarcely seems adequate justification for Sendak to break away from MacDonald's text so dramatically. There is a scene with an ugly titled lady disliking a baby in both stories. But this parallel is probably mere coincidence.

Sendak may however have recognised other similarities between the two stories. Carroll undoubtedly alludes to *The Lost Princess* in his courthouse scene. The courthouse represents Alice's body, with the 'judgment seat' at one end and the 'dish' in the centre. Similarly in *The Light Princess* 'the most beautiful lake in the world', with a gold plate at its centre, serves as the physical body of the princess. This is a necessity because the princess is described as 'a fifth imponderable body', lacking the four elements of the material world. The way the baby is thrown around is another feature common to the two stories. But Sendak certainly does not seem to allude to these passages, and there are other unexpected details in his depiction of the enchanting of the princess at her baptism. Do readers have any observations to make on this matter?

Amelia and Rosamund

In February of 1870, *Aunt Judy's Magazine* published the first half of "Amelia and the Dwarfs", 'By the Author of Mrs Overthway's Reminiscences'. The second half of the story appeared the following month. Its theme of a disobedient child being cured by a period of hard labour amongst fairy folk is not a particularly original one. But MacDonald's story *The Wise Woman*, which first appeared as "A Double Story" in *Good Things*, December 1874-July 1875, has too many details in common with the story of Amelia for these to be due merely to the shared theme. By contrast to MacDonald's borrowings for such works as *Phantastes* and "The Giant's Heart", his quarrying of Amelia is not particularly important, but it seems worthy of note.

The story of Amelia illustrates the important spiritual/psychological truth that there is an 'underground' realm where a person's 'bad deeds' accumulate, these impede the movements of the 'beings' of that realm, and the person must eventually deal with the situation. Sadly, the

details are not very imaginative, and, more importantly, Amelia's amelioration is neither psychologically nor morally consistent.

In "The Giant's Heart", MacDonald parodies another highly moral fairy tale - "Uncle David's Story" from Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House*. But *The Wise Woman* is in no sense a parody. MacDonald is simply quarrying material to create one of the most powerful of all his stories.

MacDonald reflects the adult archness of the beginning of "Amelia" in his comments upon the peculiar nature of the country where Rosamund is born. His description of her spoilt nature is as detailed and convincing as that of Amelia, although Rosamund is in a far worse state. He replaces the bulldog whose actions are a major element in Amelia's cure by the Shepherd's dog Prince. The equivalent in MacDonald's story of the changeling who takes the place of Amelia in her home is the Shepherd's daughter Agnes. The old woman of ambivalent moral outlook who teaches Amelia is transformed by MacDonald into the two figures of the Wise Woman and the Shepherd's wife. Various other parallels are also apparent. But although in general MacDonald is simply quarrying from "Amelia", he does seem to acknowledge his debt to the story in one clever pun. Unlike Grimm's "Snowdrop" (Disney's "Snow White"), Amelia with the dwarfs did not share their dwelling but 'slept on the heath' (dictionary definition: heath - a waste tract of land). Rosamund sleeps in the Wise Woman's cottage, yet there her bed is 'a patch of thick-growing heath in one corner (dictionary definition: heath - a low shrub of the *Ericaceae* family).



Amelia (artist unknown)



Rosamund-by Bernhard Oberdieck

"Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910." An exhibition at the Tate Gallery London until 4 Jan. 1998

This is yet another London art exhibition which we strongly recommend to our members. A visit is not likely to prove a very pleasurable experience, although there are a few almost unknown exhibits of startling quality. But the exhibition goes far towards elucidating features in MacDonald's writing which tend to perplex the modern reader. Bram Dijkstra's book, *Idols of Perversity*, Oxford 1986, was recommended to us in this context by Dieter Petzold, and this richly illustrated work is an invaluable tool. But its central theme is the way French Saloon painting of the period reflects *fin de siècle* decadence. The *fin de siècle* situation in Britain was subtly different in many respects, and these differences are well brought out in the present large exhibition.

The group of writers and artists around F.D. Maurice did not attempt to shut themselves off from such decadence: they strove to comprehend and uplift it. As a generalisation it could be

said that MacDonald and Kingsley were successful in resisting the tide, but that Ruskin, who waged the most overt attack, was defeated, while D.G. Rossetti in part overcame but in part was ensnared.

Most examples of Symbolist art and literature evoke no emotional responses in an ordinary person of the present day other than boredom, perplexity, or a vague sensation of concealed evil. The numerous 'grand allegories of the great universals of existence, love, life, death' are so wholly devoid of the zest exhibited by the better 'grand allegories' of earlier periods that they could appeal only to a nation whose natural emotions had atrophied to a remarkable degree. These, however, bear no relevance to MacDonald's writings. It is otherwise with the 'decadent' art which comprises most of the remaining items in the exhibition. Some 'decadent' art and literature is explicit, but most engenders merely a vague unease, because it employs systems of private symbolism. These apparently derive their inspiration from the complex and ever-changing system of private allusions employed by sexual deviants at all periods of history. Such concealment is not primarily intended as a protective device. On the contrary, its main aim is to heighten the perverted pleasures of those initiated into the meaning of the symbols. One quickly learns not to read the explanatory notes accompanying pictures in the exhibition which seem to come into this category!

In *Lilith*, MacDonald uniquely attempts to redeem all evil, wrestling with every form of it which he can comprehend. In addition, many of his novels first depict how people are dragged down into specific forms of evil and then, wholly convincingly, record their subsequent redemption. This British Symbolists exhibition is important for MacDonald enthusiasts in confirming that he was wrestling with all-pervasive evils of his time, not indulging private obsessions, as has been suggested by critics such as Raeper.

Material for the Spring 1998 edition of *Orts* must be received by the end of January. We hope Tim Braithwaite will have resumed the editorship by then, but as a precaution please continue to send contributions to 9 Medway Drive, FOREST ROW, RH18 5NU.