Orts 50, 1999

The George MacDonald Society

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THE 1998 AGM ADDRESS: ROBERT WHELAN ON OCTAVIA HILL

The relatively small number of members who were able to attend the Society's AGM in London on October 16th were privileged to hear a most interesting and informative talk about the life and work of George MacDonald's great friend, the social reformer Octavia Hill (1838-1912). The talk was given by Robert Whelan, Assistant Director of the Health and Welfare Unit at the Institute of Economic Affairs, the independent 'think-tank' whose views were said to have been particularly influential when Margaret Thatcher was in power. Robert Whelan, who has a degree in English from Cambridge, has written widely on social policy and has a particular interest in advocating policies which support the ‘traditional’ family unit of husband and wife and their children.

Octavia Hill is remembered today, if at all, as a founder of the National Trust, but this was only one of her interests and not the most important. Yet she was regarded as one of the most eminent women of Victorian times. Only three women were invited to attend in their own right the service held in Westminster Abbey in 1887 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee: Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler (who campaigned against the oppression of women) and Octavia Hill. Robert Whelan's talk concentrated upon Octavia's work in the field of social housing. He has edited for the Institute of Economic Affairs her essays and letters on this subject and has written an introductory biographical essay.

Octavia's parents had set up a pioneering infant school in Wisbeach, Cambs. . .based upon the same ideas as Robert Owen's New Lanark school. Sadly, her father over-extended himself and was declared bankrupt in 1840. Shortly after this he suffered a nervous breakdown and, on medical advice, never lived with his family again. Octavia's mother moved around the country with her children and eventually settled in London. Here she came under the influence of the Rev. Frederick Denison Maurice, then the chaplain of Lincoln's Inn. Although Octavia, (like Maurice himself) had been brought up as a Unitarian, she and her sisters were baptised and confirmed by him into the Church of England. Maurice offered her a job as secretary to the women's classes at the Working Men's College in Red Lion Square, and it was here that she met John Ruskin, who taught her to draw. But Octavia's career was not to be as an artist but as a social reformer. Maurice and the other Christian Socialists, such as Charles Kingsley, were determined to alleviate the dreadful conditions in which the poor lived in London and it was through their influence that she embarked on her remarkable career in housing management. It
was in 1864 that she first set herself up as a landlady in Marylebone, acquiring property with money provided by Ruskin, who had become a wealthy man on the death of his father, a sherry merchant.

The houses she bought were in Paradise Place, Marylebone, a court so rough it was known as 'Little Hell'. Here, at the very beginning, she began to develop her unique system. While there were philanthropic housing societies in existence (like the Peabody Donation Fund) which built model dwellings for the 'respectable' poor, Octavia's mission was to the poor who were far from respectable. She would acquire existing dwellings, often in the worst areas, and set about improving tenants and tenements together. Her work included finding employment, encouraging savings, and giving advice and assistance to the tenants as well as the actual management of the properties. There was nothing sentimental about Octavia's philanthropy. Her tenants, poor as they were, had to pay their own way and she was able to achieve a five percent return on capital for the owners of the properties she managed. As her fame spread, more and more owners wanted to put their working-class housing under her management. By the time of her death she was managing nearly two thousand houses and flats. These included large estates belonging to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (the predecessors of the present Church Commissioners).

Yet Octavia's later career, particularly after the establishment of the London County Council in 1888 was a rearguard action against the growing municipalisation of working-class housing. She was very much opposed to this and put up powerful arguments which are not without relevance today. For instance, access to public funds would allow local authorities to undercut the market and drive private landlords out of business. Public bodies are wasteful and extravagant and there is the danger of corruption when they are put in charge of large projects. Above all, good management becomes impossible when the tenants are also the landlords' constituents.

Towards the end of his talk Robert Whelan described the dire situation that obtains in social housing today and said that the government and local authorities (of all political persuasions) are prepared to look at any ideas that may get them out of the present mess. The practical Victorian idealism of Octavia Hill is well worth reconsidering in Robert Whelan's view. He did not deal with Octavia's relationship with MacDonald and his family, but this fascinating and expertly delivered talk gave us an insight into the world of the London poor described by MacDonald in his 'Dickensian' novel Guild Court and, above all, in At the Back of the North Wind.

R. L.


RETIREMENTS FROM THE COMMITTEE

There were three retirements from the Committee at the A.G.M.

Phil Streeter was a founder member of the Society in 1980 and had held the post of Committee
Chairman for most of the period since then. He was an active speaker for the Society in its early years. A Pentecostal preacher by profession he not only cares for a large parish in Essex but is very active further afield, for example being involved with his wife in relief-work visits to Bosnia. He is a great lover of literature in the Wordsworthian mode—that is to say he is particularly interested in books which explore the true souls of the characters and relate them meaningfully to their local landscapes. Someone like this, with a genuine love for genuine literature, inevitably brings a great deal to the running of a literary society like ours and meetings will never be the same without him.

Rachel Johnson joined the Society very soon after its inception. She is a senior librarian at a famous old college in Lincolnshire. For most of the life of the Society she has held the onerous posts of Treasurer and Membership Secretary and always performed her tasks in exemplary fashion. Rachel has researched extensively upon the family dramatic troop which the MacDonalds established, including doing conservation work on some of the surviving props. We hope that she will be able to present the fruits of her researches at a future meeting or meetings of the Society (see below). Rachel continues to be the distributor for back numbers of North Wind and Orts. She is also the European distributor for Johannesens books. (But if you are ordering from both categories please do not use just a single cheque as these are separate ventures!)

Douglas Troup was invited onto the Committee some five years ago because it was strongly felt that someone with legal training was needed. It was a large added bonus that Douglas is a charming and unflappable person and a direct descendant of the Huntly/Rhynie family so closely associated with the MacDonalds. Not surprisingly, he was soon persuaded to become Vice-Chairman and Secretary. As a solicitor with a busy London practice, however, he feels he can no longer devote the time required for this work now that the Committee has a Chairman who is a lawyer.

Freda Levson, another founder-member, the first Editor for the Society and for many years the hostess for Committee Meetings, was obliged to retire in December due to increasing ill-health. Anticipating her retirement, Phil Streeter read a eulogy at the AGM to which Freda gave a charming response. We hope that transcripts will be available for the next Orts.

FUTURE EVENTS

The Workshop on The Lost Princess (The Wise Woman) to be held jointly with the School for Therapeutic Storytelling will run from April 30th to May 2nd at Merriam Hill Education Center in Greenville, New Hampshire, a 'non-profit organisation established for wisdom and community located in 54 acres of hills and woods 90 minutes north-west of Boston in the Monadnock region.'

MacDonald wanted his readers to associate his stories—the fairy tales in particular—with their own situations. A previous workshop, where Adela Cathcart and its included stories was approached in this way by a small group over a period of several days, yielded astonishing—and in most cases wholly unexpected—insights which could not easily have been obtained in any
other way. The Lost Princess should lend itself particularly well to the workshop approach because most people can identify all too easily with the mistakes of the two sets of parents in the story. But we will also look closely at the Wise Woman herself, exploring her relationship with the wonderful wise women in MacDonald's other fairy tales. And we will not fail to try to understand what it means that Princess Rosamund is 'the rose of the world.'

For further information please contact Nancy Mellon by phone or fax at (001) 603 654 2982.

The Biennial Conference of the International Research Society for Children's Literature will be hosted this year by Rod McGillis at the University of Calgary, from July 5th-9th. The theme is: "Children's Literature and the Fin de Siècle". Proposals for papers or workshops must be submitted as soon as possible to Prof. Jo-Ann Wallace, Dept of English, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2E5.

The next Inklings Symposium will be on the subject of "Children's Fantasy Literature". It will be held on Friday and Saturday the 23rd and 24th of April in Leipzig. For information please contact Prof. Dr. Elmar Schenkel, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Leipzig, Augustusplatz 3-11, 04109 LEIPZIG. Tel. (0049) 341 9737312; home tel. and fax 342 9787102

To avoid further delay, the MacDonald-Chesterton Conference, unavoidably postponed from last year, will now be a one-day conference on a Saturday. The Centre for Faith and Culture with whom we are co-operating on this venture ran a similar, highly successful, one-day conference on Chesterton and Dorothy Sayers recently, so we do not anticipate any insurmountable problems in organising this Conference with them and hope to be able to announce full details in the spring.

We hope to hold the Conference at Oxford this autumn, celebrating the 75th anniversary of Chesterton's Introduction to Greville MacDonald's biography of his father; the 175th anniversary of MacDonald's birth and the 125th anniversary of Chesterton's birth. This should be a highly enjoyable conference for all members of the Society who can attend.

We are investigating the possibility of a one-day event on MacDonald and Bunyan in Bedford in 2000. We are also looking into the possibility of MacDonald Society events at literary festivals in America and Britain, possibly associated with Mark Twain enthusiasts in America and with Chesterton enthusiasts in Britain.

Orts and Wingfold

Sadly, no response has been received from Barbara Amell to our proposal regarding her MacDonald fanzine Wingfold which was mentioned in Orts 49. We will continue to investigate ways of improving Orts, but newsletters of this sort depend primarily upon readers providing a steady supply of material. Plenty of things are happening, but we cannot report them unless we learn of them. For example, I first learnt of the Hughes exhibition from my son, who keeps a close watch for all new art exhibitions in the London area, not from any of the MacDonald Society members with a particular interest in Hughes. Had we learnt of it earlier it
could have been reported it in the last Orts, giving readers much more time to plan a visit.

More on 'censorship' and 'selection' of children's reading: "The Most Frequently Banned (sic) Books in the 1990s".

Orts 43 carried a review of the special volume of Para*doxa on "Censorship in Children's Literature". This is a crucially important subject for the MacDonald Society because what are universally recognised as MacDonald's greatest stories were written 'for the young of all ages' and are most easily understood if we read them first as children. In the genre of Märchen they are recognised as some of the finest stories ever written. Moreover their language and imagery is as accessible today as when they were written. But at all times when authoritarian views prevail there is powerful opposition to stories like this which seek to awaken the higher imagination.

What is most interesting about the Para*doxa volume is the astonishingly biased view of 'censorship' displayed by the contributors who write about the contemporary situation. This undoubtedly reflects current educational dogma. The article which serves as the bibliography for the volume lists numerous papers plus some twenty full-length books, and all apparently adopt this same biased stance. Very rarely do their authors even recognise that any defence is required for the form of censorship, euphemistically called 'selection,' which they themselves propound. No opposing books or articles are listed in this bibliography.

The claims made in these books and articles have gained wide currency far beyond American educational circles. For example, a long piece in a supplement to the British Guardian newspaper of Oct. 24th 1998 was based upon one of the most quoted of these books: Banned in the U.S.A. by Herbert N. Foerstel, Greenwood Press, 1994. The writer of the Guardian article claims to be concerned about 'the increasing attempts by U.S. schools to censor or ban books'. Yet his article completely ignores this situation. It simply repeats the rhetoric of the American educators quoted by Foerstel.

The fourth chapter in Foerstel's book is titled: "The Most Frequently Banned Books in the 1990's." His list of fifty books has been prominently quoted in sensationalist articles because it includes not a few major classics. But what does Foerstel actually say? His book bears the broad subtitle, A Reference Guide to Book Censorship in Schools and Public Libraries, yet in fact is almost wholly devoted to books used for English lessons in U.S. schools. His chapter four, which occupies a full third of the book, is not concerned with banned books. It deals merely with books whose use in schools has been challenged. This is a very different thing, as the challenges were successful in only some 0.1% of cases! Either the writers of the sensationalist articles which draw upon Foerstel’s book do not bother to read it, or they choose deliberately to adopt the same misleading approach as he uses in his chapter title.

Challenges of particular school books usually originate from parents, although they often come to be backed by evangelical pressure groups. Such challenges are opposed by the educators who select and use the books. The most striking thing about this conflict is its extremely one-sided nature. In selecting particular English texts for school use, the educators have rejected some 95%
of potentially appropriate textbooks and anthologies and more than 99.9% of potentially appropriate works of fiction. A selection process is inevitable, of course; but educators refuse to acknowledge that such a process is as much a form of censorship as is the opposition to an occasional selected book. It would be difficult to imagine a more extreme form of 'beam and splinter' reasoning than their self-righteous response to criticisms of their selection procedures. Because of the degree to which the book-selection process seems to be determined by transiently fashionable, superficial sociological theories this is a very serious situation.

Educators recognise that 'censorship works against the belief that children and young people should have access to literature as distinct from instructive fables' (as summarised by one contributor to the *Para*doxa volume, p.506). Yet they never acknowledge that this is particularly applicable to the form of censorship which they themselves employ. It seems to be precisely 'instructive fables' which they most favour! Humphrey Carpenter observed that such stories, 'can be as joyless and heavily didactic as the Victorian evangelical novel at its worse (Secret Gardens p.1). The situation has deteriorated so much since he wrote in 1985 that he would not now qualify his observation with 'can be'. American publishers have quickly learnt that commissioning heavily didactic books with titles such as *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather has Two Mummies*—two books from Foerstel's list—is a sure-fire way to get them adopted for school use!

Recent surveys in Britain, reported in *Orts*, have shown that children far prefer imaginative moral stories to the genre promoted by many publishing houses—powerfully depicted as a deluge of corrosive slime by Salman Rushdie in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Two genre in particular dominate this outpouring: on the one hand 'gritty' pseudo-realism—the decadent didactic genre favoured by the educators--; and on the other supernatural horror—the decadent genre which, as C.S. Lewis emphasises (George MacDonald pp. 20-21) most rapidly induces addiction in immature minds. Not surprising, many young people turn to this genre as relief from soulless school texts, and thus the publishers secure a 'hooked' readership.

As was noted in the *Para*doxa review in *Orts*, MacDonald approaches children's reading via the concept of 'wise criticism', which he defines as 'a spirit of criticism for the sake of truth . . . . Were there enough of such wise criticism, there would be ten times the study of the best writers of the past, and perhaps one-tenth of the admiration for the ephemeral productions of the day.' But in America today it is only in some private schools that a young child is likely to escape a diet largely composed of just such 'ephemeral productions of the day.' MacDonald's 'Christian fantasies' are read in the lower grades of some private schools, and they are important in the courses on "Fantasy Literature" offered by an increasing number of college English departments. But other young people are unlikely to encounter them unless their parents enjoyed them when young. They may perhaps see videos based upon the stories, but those are mere vulgar husks from which all the imaginative power has evaporated.

Although the attempts by groups of parents to oppose books selected by 'educators' have only occasionally been successful, some publishers have noted the widespread popular feeling behind the attempts, and this has led them to create yet another decadent genre: school anthologies which are so bland that they satisfy both the most militant parents and the most militant educators. For example, a few protests orchestrated by religious groups have caused local
education boards in some school districts to impose short-lasting blanket-bans excluding all books mentioning witchcraft. This, of course, excludes some of the best work of writers such as George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. These bans have undoubtedly influenced scholastic publishers and had a deleterious effect upon their selection of material for anthologies for school use.

It is, however, MacDonald's subversive attitude to all forms of authoritarianism which has generated the most antagonism, and this appears to be what primarily prevents any use of his books in American state schools at the present time. From the religious right wing the antagonism manifests as general hatred of what is called 'secular humanism,' or 'human autonomy.' From the atheists of the left it manifests as 'political correctness', which seeks to abolish everything except secular humanism. It is no wonder that both are opposed to MacDonald's books!

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Yeats and MacDonald

In Yeats' "Journal", published in *Memoirs*, ed Denis Donoghue, London, Macmillan 1972, p. 276, the entry for October 30th 1930 starts with a criticism of the staging of a production of *King Lear* which Yeats had seen the previous evening. He then goes on:

I once saw the George MacDonald family play Pilgrim's Progress with scenery worked with wool on bleached canvas, and always in full light, and the result was beautiful and simple, always the right thing, never 'arty'.

This recalls the account by Ernest Rhys of MacDonald as poet and actor republished in *North Wind* 15. Rhys was a friend of Yeats and they founded the Rhymer's Club together. It is very unlikely that Yeats saw the same performance by 'The Pilgrims' in Sunderland described by Rhys. But it may have been at Rhys' suggestion that he subsequently went to see 'The Pilgrims' when they were playing at a more convenient location.

R. L.

TWO VERY IMPORTANT NEW MACDONALD REPRINTS

The World's Classics-Oxford UP one-volume, paperback edition of *The Princess and the Goblin/The Princess and Curdie*, with its splendid introduction and notes by Roderick McGillis, should be out in a revised edition very shortly. This is particularly encouraging because a few years back the O.U.P. had told Rod they would not be reprinting when stocks were exhausted. Unlike MacDonald's novels, these fairy tales never suffered any major decline in popularity. The O.U.P.'s doubts arose from the opposite problem of there being too many editions in print. Some of these other editions are rewrites of unbelievable banality, and in such circumstances it is encouraging that the O.U.P. have found that demand for the real stories continues unabated. I like to keep in hand a small stock of this inexpensive volume because it is ideal to give to people who express an interest in MacDonald. It is particularly suitable for people with children, because the children can then explain the more profound passages to them. All MacDonald's
fiction contains insights most easily appreciated by the childlike, and this is especially the case with these two stories.

Greville MacDonald's famous 1924 biography of his parents, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, which has long fetched huge prices on the second-hand market, has now been reprinted by Johannesens in a format uniform with their reprints of George MacDonald's books. It is indispensable to anyone seriously interested in the ideas which lie behind MacDonald's writings. Some materialistic critics have dismissed it as a work of filial piety, implying that such a work must—for some wholly unexplained reason—be valueless. But anyone who did not have a feeling of reverence for a father like MacDonald would be a fool, and Greville was no fool. He correctly recognised that it was inappropriate and unnecessary to dwell upon his father's failings. Those 'failings' which are relevant to the book—for example, what Rolland Hein calls MacDonald's desperate dependency upon his wife for love and support—are perfectly evident without being directly mentioned at all. Others, such as aspects of his attitude to punishment, are irrelevant to the biography; but Greville had no hesitation in describing them in some detail when he subsequently wrote his own autobiography, *Reminiscences of a Specialist*, where they certainly are relevant.

Most later biographers have drawn heavily upon Greville's biography, often failing to check upon such details as dates and quotations, where Greville not infrequently falls below normally accepted standards of accuracy. Other researchers, by contrast, have tended to give too little attention to Greville's work, ignoring very important material. For example, while several researchers have been fascinated by the account of MacDonald's involvement in Ruskin's emotional life, only Adelheid Kegler has given serious attention to Greville's account of their shared sociological concerns.

A biographer like Greville, who attempts to give a rounded portrait of his subject, must at times resort to covert allusion, and this is particularly the case where the biographer is the subject's son. But Greville's writing is often covert and oblique when there is no manifest reason for this. He had learnt from his father that a good book does not reveal all its treasures upon a first reading! A typical example of this is where, in describing the circumstances surrounding the death of one of MacDonald's brothers, he emphasises the same details as MacDonald utilises in *Phantastes* where Anodos relives the experience of the death of a brother. There is no doubt that Greville is drawing our attention to the parallel, but he leaves us to discover his father's autobiographical allusion for ourselves.

### THE SOCIETY PAGES ON MIKE PARTRIDGE'S 'WINGFOLD' WEB SITE

We will gradually be increasing the material in these pages, concentrating at first upon items not readily accessible to the ordinary reader because published in unexpected places, like Kathryn Lindskoog's paper from the *Mark Twain Journal*. We also plan to establish as soon as possible an information service to answer questions about MacDonald and his books. The Sayers Society are finding that such an information service is very popular and serves a real need.

The MacDonald information service will not duplicate what can readily be found on the Wingfold web-pages or on other sites listed there. Nor will it deal with factual questions which
could promptly be answered by reading the relevant MacDonald book—for example: 'What is the name of Joseph Polwarth's brother in *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*'? MacDonald published over fifty different books. All these contain profound insights, and some, such as *Lilith*, are of quite exceptional profundity; so we cannot, of course, claim that every question will receive an adequate answer!

Mike tells us that his decision to add the daily verse from the Diary of an Old Soul to his email list is generating a remarkable level of interest from the contributors.

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**ARTHUR HUGHES AT RICHMOND, SURREY**

There is currently a small but excellent Arthur Hughes exhibition at Richmond Art Gallery. It has been mounted by the borough to commemorate the fact that Hughes had his studio at Eastgate House on Richmond Green for very many years. The organisers had assistance from Leonard Roberts and Stephen Wildman, who brought out the splendid *Catalogue Raisonné* reviewed in *Orts* 46. They have compiled a fine catalogue for the present exhibition, with colour illustrations of every picture.

This is the first Hughes exhibition since the one Leslie Cowan organised at Leighton House and Cardiff in 1971. Many of the pictures that were in that exhibition are not now available for public display. Nevertheless, nearly half of the exhibits at Richmond come from private collections and one or two have never previously been on public exhibition.

The many members who came to the illustrated talk on Arthur Hughes which Leslie Cowan gave to the Society in 1993, and those members who have obtained the *Catalogue Raisonné*, are certain to find several of their favourites in this present exhibition. It has been designed to illustrate the whole range of Hughes work in subjects and in time, using some of his best and most-loved paintings. Three of his original drawings for *At the Back of the North Wind* are also included. The charming portrait of Edward Hughes reproduced in *Orts* 47 is there, also an equally delightful portrait of the young Alexander Munro as Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and a remarkable early self-portrait where Hughes wears the same costume.

The exhibition is open Tuesdays to Saturdays, 11 am to 5pm until March 13th. And, of course, Richmond is always a beautiful town to visit, only half an hour from central London by trains which run every few minutes.
Cademon’s Awakening

This is one of the paintings in the Richmond exhibition. No one who has not seen the original can imagine the remarkable beauty and the deep emotional impact of this painting. Yet it is very far from being ‘sentimental’.

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Orts: 50 (1999)

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