NEWS

MacDonald on BBC Television

George MacDonald received welcome publicity on BBC Television’s popular Sunday afternoon religious programme Songs of Praise on 16th January this year when I was interviewed about his life and work in a programme broadcast from Arundel in West Sussex. Songs of Praise, which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year, is centred around hymns chosen by local people and sung in a cathedral or large church, but also includes interviews with local people and others about matters of interest.

The Arundel Songs of Praise was recorded mainly in the Roman Catholic cathedral in this attractive little town, but the BBC researchers had done their homework, and in the early autumn the George MacDonald Society was approached to talk about MacDonald who was briefly the Minister of the Trinity Congregational Church in the town in the early 1850s. I agreed to be interviewed and on a very chilly November morning I drove to Arundel and met the presenter, Sally Magnusson, and her team. The interview was held in the Trinity Church building, which is now an antiques mart, and the filming took about an hour and a half to produce an interview which, when shown on the programme, lasted exactly two minutes and fifty four seconds. I was asked about MacDonald’s fantasies for children and adults, and why he was important, both in his own day and for his influence on later writers, in particular C. S. Lewis. The books I mentioned were Phantastes and At the Back of the North Wind. I said that the latter book is all about death, the death of a child, an all too common occurrence in Victorian families, and perhaps for that reason MacDonald’s writing is not as well known today as it should be. A photograph of MacDonald was shown during the interview and actor read some lines from The Princess and the Goblin and At the Back of the North Wind. He had a soft Scottish accent. I am not sure if it was Aberdeen! A video clip of the interview was available to watch on the internet for about a week.

I was delighted to have this opportunity to talk about “our author.” Just under three minutes does not sound very long, but it is amazing how much can be packed into a very short interview. We live in the age of the sound bite and we have to accept that. I hope I did George MacDonald justice in what I said about him.

Richard Lines
The Gifts of the Child Christ: a Short Film Adaptation

Readers often comment that MacDonald’s fiction deserves to be brought to the moving screen, yet there remains a dearth of adaptions for either film or television. Into this desert comes a bright gem in the form of Nils Taranger’s short film The Gifts of the Child Christ. A faithful adaptation of MacDonald’s 1882 short story of the same name, this is the first film version of a MacDonald story to appear since József Gémes’s 1992 animated feature The Princess and the Goblin. Taranger, an up-and-coming American filmmaker, produced the film in 2008 as part of his undergraduate studies at the University of Central Florida.

While it was surely no easy task to pare down MacDonald’s 12,000-word, seven-chapter text, Taranger handles the conversion with apparent ease. His six-minute film dispenses with secondary plot lines, yet retains the story’s kernel of childish wonder, grief, and love as it dramatizes the tale of little Sophy, who mistakes her stillborn brother for the infant Jesus.

Featuring Danielle Parker as young Sophy, with Justin Bowen and Jamie Delgatti as her father and stepmother Mr. and Mrs. Greatorex, the film narrates the story from point of view of the aged Sophy, voiced by Peg O’Keef. With its symphonic soundtrack, chiaroscuro lighting, and candlelit palette of gold and shadowy browns, the film builds a somber atmosphere that
gives way to the luminous glow of Christmas morning.

The film was accepted into the 2010 Central Florida Film Festival, and was also selected as a finalist in the Las Vegas Film Festival. Taranger continues to build his filmmaking portfolio as he pursues an MFA in Digital Entrepreneurial Cinema at the University of Central Florida. Viewers may watch the film on Taranger’s YouTube channel, http://www.youtube.com/blueflowerfilm.

Jennifer Koopman

Tori Amos to Bring “The Light Princess” to London Stage

A musical adaptation of MacDonald’s 1864 story “The Light Princess” is in the works, thanks to American pianist and singer-songwriter Tori Amos. Amos, who has contributed to numerous film soundtracks and released nearly a dozen records since her 1992 debut album Little Earthquakes, is composing the musical in collaboration with Australian playwright and screenwriter Samuel Adamson.

Amos’s music, known for its lyricism and emotional intensity, frequently incorporates elements of fairy tale, a characteristic that has earned the artist the popular title of “Queen of Fairies” of alternative rock. The daughter of a Methodist clergyman, she eschews organized religion, and her work offers provocative critiques of Christian orthodoxy, patriarchy, and the abuse of power.

How she will interpret MacDonald’s satirical fairy tale with its redemptionary subtext and double entendre remains to be seen, as audiences must wait until April 2012 when The Light Princess makes its debut at the Royal National Theater in London. However, those eager for a taste may turn to her 2009 album Midwinter Graces, where “Winter’s Carol,” a song written for The Light Princess, appears on the eleventh track. A masterful piece that sets Amos’s ethereal vocals to piano with a stately orchestral accompaniment, “Winter’s Carol” features her hallmark poeticism and expressiveness. Its evocation of the “first song of the robin” “ringing out from pine to oak / Bringing out with the December snow / […] a gift of old / Wrapped in ribbons of gold for the whole world” recalls the themes of seasonal rebirth and spiritual renewal that run throughout MacDonald’s work.

Jennifer Koopman

Among His Contemporaries: St Andrews Conference Report

On 30 March 2011, scholars from around the United Kingdom and North America gathered in the ancient university town of St Andrews for George MacDonald Among His Contemporaries, the first major academic conference on MacDonald in almost six years. The aim of the one-day event was to place MacDonald solidly within his historical context and to explore the ways in which he engaged with the people, movements and ideas of his time. Hosted by the School of English in Kennedy Hall, the conference was originally envisaged by Ginger Stelle who then enlisted the aid of John Patrick Pazdziora to help organize the event with assistance and oversight.
provided by their academic advisor, Dr. Christopher MacLachlan.

The morning began with a plenary session delivered by Professor Stephen Prickett (University of Kent, Canterbury), discussing “George MacDonald and the Idea of Tradition.” Professor Prickett drew from his recent book *Modernity and Reinvention of Tradition: Backing into the Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) the argument that the word *tradition* almost entirely disappeared from usage during the eighteenth century but that it was revived in the nineteenth century as the Enlightenment distrust of inherited ideas began to come into question. Instead of *tradition* having a purely negative connotation, writers in the nineteenth century took more varied and nuanced views of how past ideas affect the present. Professor Prickett suggested that George MacDonald chiefly reflected on the uses and importance of tradition through the image of the library.

Focusing on the centrality of the library in *Lilith*, Professor Prickett then argued that MacDonald viewed tradition as a mode of thinking that is both valuable but also potentially dangerous. Tradition for MacDonald is in some sense a gift of previous generations that each individual needs to internalize, yet tradition can also potentially be a poison as illustrated by the mangled book containing Lilith’s soul. According to Professor Prickett’s reading, MacDonald dialectically insists that tradition is both valuable and valueless.

After the plenary, participants had to make difficult choices on which three of the six excellent panel sessions to attend. In the panel on “Natural and Supernatural,” a paper discussing how MacDonald received and modified the tradition of Coleridge and F. D. Maurice on the significance of miracles was followed by a stimulating paper by Alison Crockford (University of Edinburgh) on MacDonald’s use of the divine child figure and extra-linguistic modes of communication. Simultaneously, the panel on “Social Conscience and Imagination” discussed how MacDonald’s works and ideas related to other major Victorian writers like John Ruskin and Christina Rossetti and how all these authors used imaginative creations to criticize and help modify their time and culture.

Following lunch, the programme resumed with panels on “George MacDonald in Scotland” and “Victorian Media.” In the first, two papers explored MacDonald’s Scottishness. Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson (St Andrews), with an *in absentia* paper read by Ginger Stelle, offered a biographical sketch of MacDonald’s maternal uncle MacIntosh MacKay who was a scholar, friend of Walter Scott, and involved in the formation of the Free Church of Scotland. John Patrick Pazdziora then presented a paper that placed MacDonald’s fairytale “The Light Princess” in dialogue with “Prince Prigio” by fellow-Scotsman Andrew Lang. Meanwhile, the panel on “Victorian Media” discussed MacDonald in relationship to contemporary artists like the pre-Raphaelites and looked at the effects that serialization had upon the themes and genres of *At the Back of the North Wind*. The raciest pair of panels was reserved for the last as participants chose between sexuality and the gothic. A nice balance was struck in the panel on “Gendering Authority” as the first paper by Philip Hickok (University of Aberdeen) on “Deifying the Feminine” in *Robert Falconer* was counter-
weighted by Jenny Neophytou (Brunel University), who presented on masculinity in “The Broken Swords.” Concurrently, in the panel on “Gothic Romanticism,” Jennifer Koopman (McGill University) and David Melville Wingrove (University of Edinburgh) gave two of the most animated papers of the day exploring the eerie side of MacDonald’s writings, particularly in *Donal Grant* and *Lilith*. Koopman argued that MacDonald recast Romantic figures like Shelley and Byron into the narrative landscape of *Donal Grant* while Wingrove examined *Lilith* as a vampire story and showed the ways in which it both conformed to and deviated from this dark genre.

The final session was a plenary given by Dr. David Robb (University of Dundee) entitled “George MacDonald and the Grave Livers.” Reflecting on a phrase from Wordsworth’s poem “Resolution and Independence”—“Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use, / Religious men, who give to God and man their dues”—Dr. Robb observed how frequently in MacDonald’s novels and particularly in *David Elginbrod* there seems to be an assumption that one must be Scottish in order to improve things. According to Dr. Robb, this image of impressively holy Scots was a popular English view of their northern neighbours during the nineteenth century. Writers like MacDonald drew upon this picture of Scotland as a spiritual and moral place to give fictional characters and settings a readily recognizable gravitas. Dr. Robb then provided examples of this image as widely diverse as English newspaper accounts of the 1843 Disruption that led to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland to George Eliot’s dislike of a Thomas Chalmers’ description of the spiritual wisdom of the Scottish peasantry. Though as Dr. Robb admitted this evidence was not exhaustive, it convincingly showed that the trope of the solemnly religious Scot was prevalent within Victorian culture.

Overall, the conference made the most of its brief time and presented a nuanced portrait of George MacDonald the Victorian writer, preacher, thinker, and friend who was thoroughly a part of his age. *George MacDonald Among His Contemporaries* was an important step in correcting the still dominant view of him as the timeless grandfather of modern fantasy literature.

Daniel Gabelman
University of St Andrews
**ORTS INTERVIEW**

Isabel Kolkka on MacDonald and Lucy Maud Montgomery

In her dissertation Fairy Tales and Fairy Tale Motifs in Selected Works by L.M. Montgomery, Isabel Kolkka, a doctoral candidate at Friedrich Schiller Universität in Jena, Germany, discusses the influence of George MacDonald on Lucy Maud Montgomery, the Canadian writer who is best known as the creator of the red-headed heroine Anne of Green Gables. Kolkka spoke to Orts about Anne of Green Gables, Emily of New Moon, and female wind figures.

Who was Montgomery, and what is her literary significance?

**KOLKKA:** Author, teacher, photographer, mother—these are just some facets of one of Canada’s most famous writers of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Thanks to the popularity of her 1908 novel *Anne of Green Gables*, Montgomery has become a national icon who draws fans from all over the world to Prince Edward Island, which provides the setting for most of her stories. The red earth and pastoral beauty of her birthplace is a hallmark of her writing, as are her passionate and imaginative female characters, women who resist established social patterns. Drawing on the English and American literary traditions, Montgomery created distinctly Canadian texts during a time when Canadian literature was still in its infancy. Her works, geared mainly toward a juvenile audience, continue to have a lasting influence on readers and writers around the world.

In the 1936 novel *Anne of Windy Poplars*, Anne refers to At the Back of the North Wind, writing, “I’ve always envied the boy who flew with the north wind in that lovely old story of George MacDonald’s. Some night, […] I’ll open my tower casement and just step into the arms of the wind… and Rebecca Dew will never know why my bed wasn’t slept in that night.” What do you think it is about MacDonald that drew Montgomery (or her character Anne Shirley) to his work?

**KOLKKA:** First and foremost, MacDonald and Montgomery share a common cultural background. He was Scottish and a Victorian, very much like her. Also, both sought a more loving God, a search that led them to Universalism and Romantic literature, and the nineteenth-century fairy-tale tradition provided at least partly the context for their writing. MacDonald’s use of the anima, the complex female imagery, the linking of textuality and sexuality, a tendency to fuse male and female qualities, and profuse use of symbols and metaphor all find their counterpart in Montgomery, and may well be a part of her attraction to his writings.

Besides At the Back of the North Wind, did Montgomery read any of MacDonald’s other books?

**KOLKKA:** Montgomery was an avid reader not only of the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, Scott and Tennyson but also of George MacDonald whose stories, as you mentioned, worked their way into many of her writings. It’s safe to assume that Montgomery was at least familiar with *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, *The Golden Key*, *At the Back of the North Wind*, *Phantastes*, and *Lilith*. The last three especially served as an inspiration for Montgomery.

How would you describe his impact on her work?
KOLKKA: It is curious that an author so often cited in Montgomery’s works is—to my knowledge—not mentioned in her journals where she writes extensively about and comments on almost all her reading. Nevertheless, MacDonald’s influence can be easily inferred from her novels’ frequent mention of MacDonald, her characters’ discussions about him, as well as from her borrowing of MacDonaldian motifs. MacDonald portrayed strong women, and his tales show a general tendency to fuse male and female qualities. A characteristic lack of gender specificity and an insistence on self-determination for women is something that can be found in Montgomery’s writing as well. The struggle for self-determination has found a way into her writing as a defining element of all her heroines.

Your research suggests that MacDonald also underlies Montgomery’s Emily trilogy. Emily doesn’t possess as global a profile as Anne, but she is a fascinating female protagonist in her own right. What makes her so significant?

KOLKKA: The Emily trilogy (which includes Emily of New Moon [1923], Emily Climbs [1925] and Emily's Quest [1927]) is Montgomery’s most autobiographic work, as it delineates the development of the heroine from a young girl of eleven into an assertive woman and artist. Emily is essentially about coming of age as a woman and an artist—a Künstlermärchen that explores the crucial forces that help or hinder Emily’s development, such as preconceived gender-roles, social conventions, and notions of romance. The child Emily is trapped in romantic conceptions acquired from reading romantic literature and fairy tales. Although she struggles against the role of a fairy-tale heroine and nearly succumbs, Emily eventually breaks the codes of closure and presses beyond binary thinking. Montgomery sets up a structure in which male opposes female, and reality opposes dream—a dichotomy common to many fairy tales. Binary thinking, as Roderick McGillis writes, is “masculine, aggressive, analytic, and adversarial,” and perpetuates differences based on authority. The reverse is equally flawed, offering a mode that is feminine, passive, imaginative, and self-sacrificing, the pitfalls of which Emily must avoid. Along the way, she faces characteristic fairy-tale trials, and is, despite her disobedience, rewarded with success and love.

To what extent do MacDonaldian elements play a role in the construction of Emily’s character?

KOLKKA: With Emily in particular, Montgomery borrows motifs from MacDonald. As with MacDonald’s Lilith and Phantastes, the Emily books resist systematization. The confrontation of two worlds, one patriarchal and resistant to change, the other subversive and mercurial, is also central to all three works. Similarities exist between the characters of Lilith and Emily. According to Sumerian/Jewish tradition, Lilith, in her revolt against Adam, spoke the Ineffable name before fleeing to the Red Sea to reside with demons. The story of Lilith mythologizes female revolt against male superiors via female speech, with Lilith portraying the paradigmatic witch/fiend who is associated with female authority and authorship. Both MacDonald’s Lilith and Montgomery’s Emily develop the themes of language and reading and, as with Lilith, Emily is censured for her erotic energy and independence. Both women manage to break free from masculine
control, at least temporarily. Another motif that both writers share, and which becomes an even more striking feature of *Emily*, is humanized nature.

**Humanized nature—you must be thinking of Emily’s Wind Woman.**

**KOLKKA:** Yes. Emily’s most important companion is the Wind Woman, who “is tall and misty, with thin, grey, silky clothes blowing all about her—and wings like a bat’s—only you can see through them—and shining eyes like stars looking through her long, loose hair.” It is a mother figure and a symbol of creativity. The figure has its origins in Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Story of the Wind,” in *Lilith’s* metamorphosing figures of the raven, leopardess, and spotted leopardess, and most importantly, in the North Wind in *At the Back of the North Wind*. MacDonald’s North Wind is female, “flapping wings like a bat’s, as big as the whole sky,” and, like Montgomery’s Wind Woman, she is a shape-shifter, appearing sometimes extremely beautiful, sometimes motherlike, and sometimes as a punishing goddess and monster. This darker side is present in Emily’s Wind Woman, too, yet Montgomery reduces the demonic traits of MacDonald’s North Wind and foregrounds the benevolent side. By shifting the emphasis, Montgomery creates an important feminist element in her story. In MacDonald’s story, the land at the back of the North Wind—a pre-step to paradise which one can reach only by walking through her—is paralleled in Emily’s “flash,” an experience that occurs when the curtain to the “world of wonderful beauty” is fluttered by a wind, allowing Emily to catch “a glimpse of the enchanting realm beyond” and hear “a note of unearthly music.” The shape-shifting, ambiguous nature of the Wind Woman presents the various aspects of femininity as they are also presented in MacDonald.

**Are there other instances in Montgomery’s work where MacDonald’s presence makes itself felt?**

**KOLKKA:** There is one further work by Montgomery that contains explicit references to *At the Back of the North Wind* and which is, in contrast to the other books mentioned, not written for a young audience. *The Blue Castle* (1926), almost a fairy tale in itself, traces the transformation of twenty-nine-year-old Valancy Stirling from a frustrated, plain, unloved, and docile girl into a grown-up, independent, responsible, and sensual woman, thereby breaking out of the rigid enclosure of society. As she did with *Emily*, Montgomery uses the wind to express Valancy’s moods and experiences. Others scholars have noted that *The Blue Castle* can be seen as part of the *Emily* series (it was written in between the second and third part of *Emily* and in some ways comments on the last part of *Emily*), so it makes sense that she uses the same imagery in the same way. It is in fact one of my arguments to support the claim that the four books should be read and discussed together. Here, references to MacDonald serve to heighten the fairytale-like atmosphere. Another idea that I am developing has to do with Montgomery’s assigning personalities to various trees, which MacDonald does most notably in *Phantastes*. Montgomery’s trees—mainly local species, so birch, spruce, pine, lombardies, apple and cherry—tend to reflect mood, and most are female. Though this is not uncommon in literature, I found that her use often correlates with MacDonald’s.

*Jennifer Koopman*
IN MEMORIAM

John Docherty (1932 – 2011)

John Docherty, a MacDonald scholar and former editor of North Wind, died on 15 July 2011, in his eightieth year. Born in Kent in 1932, John was a geologist by training, but in spirit a true renaissance man, whose interests extended to history, architecture, paleontology, landscaping, art, literature, and spirituality. His extraordinary output included the 1997 book The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll/George MacDonald Friendship, which made a lasting mark in MacDonald scholarship. He was instrumental in the evolution of the George MacDonald Society, giving lectures, writing papers, organizing activities, attending conferences, and editing the scholarly journal North Wind. He had an infectious enthusiasm for all things MacDonald and encouraged many in their pursuit of MacDonald studies. It was at a MacDonald conference in Texas in 2005 that he met his second wife, Amy Vail, who shared his love of literature and with whom he spent his final years in America. In person, John was cheerful, dynamic, and so seemingly tireless that it is difficult to accept that one so full of energy and life should finally be at rest. His family and friends grieve his passing. We at Orts salute him, for without his efforts the George MacDonald Society would not be what it is today. He will be greatly missed but warmly remembered.

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Report from the Annual General Meeting

The AGM took place November 6th, 2010, at Appian Court, London, E3 2RS. Present were Mr. Richard Lines, Chairman; Mike Partridge, Webmaster; Roger Bardet, Treasurer/Admin; Mr. Edward Preston; and Ms. Celia Lyons. Apologies had been received prior to the meeting from the Society’s President, Professor Stephen Prickett as well as from Jenny Neophytou and Rachel Johnson.

The Chairman, Richard Lines, introduced the meeting by thanking everyone, present or absent, for their contributions to the Society’s work since the last AGM. The interval had been graced with our invitation to enjoy the Outline Theatre’s production of “The Princess & the Goblin” as well as “A Christmas Carol.” While 2009 had been a quiet year, since Orts could not be produced, there was all the more appreciation of all that Jennifer Koopman in Montréal had done in taking over editorship of the newsletter.

There were sad moments, too: Geoffrey Straw had passed away early in that year. Katherine MacDonald, Richard Lines, and Roger Bardet attended the commemorative service, where the congregation heard many endearing family stories and tributes to Geoffrey’s diverse talents, such as his phenomenal memory, as well as his contribution to the Society.

The Society made a recent visit to the Octavia Hill Museum in Wisbech, where Mr. Clayton, the Curator, had discussed the prospect of future lecturing visits by Richard Lines.
Developments occurred as a result of Mike Partridge’s contact with BBC Manchester, with plans for a “Songs of Praise” episode from Arundel, where MacDonald had been appointed pastor in 1850. Richard’s invitation was fixed for 23rd November, 2010.

Notes concerning the Society’s transition to digital media

Positive news included:

- Jennifer Koopman’s setting up of an online store for the sale of GMS items.
- Jennifer Koopman, as editor, now has a full set of the previous issues of Orts.
- As a general rule, Orts is now being distributed in digital format via email.
- Jenny Neophytou has been converting MacDonald material into digital form, such as the microfiche of letters between Octavia Hill and the MacDonald family.

IT issues that remained a matter of concern to the Committee included:

- The discrepancy between GMS Facebook contacts, which number at over 500, and traditional GMS members, who are closer to 100.
- The setting up of an electronic database to keep track of traditional members.
- Work remains in setting up Paypal for Society subscriptions.
- Because of bank commission rates, the question of whether to use a dollar or a sterling account.
- The Society needs to be sure of its access to its funds.

Mike re-affirmed his willingness to give Roger every assistance in addressing these issues.

Despite all, we had a lot to celebrate, such as Rachel Johnson and Jenny Neophytou’s doctorates, all achieved while meeting full-time professional commitments. Furthermore, we could add the approaching St Andrews Conference, where Dr. Robb, Professor Prickett, and Ginger Stelle have been particularly active.

Special thanks were expressed for all that Jennifer and Mike had been doing behind the scenes. So long as Jennifer was kept supplied with material for future editions of Orts, the general outlook remained bright.

Future developments proposed:

- To keep a generous balance between our rigorous academic side, and our activities of wider appeal, such as the Facebook group.
- To endeavour to organize more activities with other societies.
- To renew our contact with the Alliance of Literary Societies.
- To keep thematic momentum going by delineating identifiable persons or places as they are set forth in MacDonald’s novels.
- With this in mind, we would work towards MacDonald Conferences & Study Days, in which the focus would be on one novel.

Election of Committee members for the following year:

Mr. Lines agreed to continue as Chairman; Mike and Roger to continue as Webmaster and Treasurer/Admin officer; and Ms. Lyons and Mr. Preston agreed to become Committee members.

This concludes the report of business covered at the 2010 AGM.

Roger Bardet
Support the George MacDonald Society

Transport your books in style and raise awareness of the GMS with this attractive George MacDonald bag bearing MacDonald’s portrait and signature. Made of sturdy 100% cotton canvas, this small tote measures 14.5” wide x 11” high x 4” deep, and is available in a variety of colors, sizes and styles. US$19.95 + shipping and handling at Zazzle.com. Novels not included. For more designs, plus mugs and T-shirts, please visit the George MacDonald Society online store at http://www.zazzle.com/georgemacdonald. All proceeds go to fund the activities of the George MacDonald Society.

“As you grow ready for it, somewhere or other you will find what is needful for you in a book or a friend, or, best of all, in your own thoughts”

—The Marquis of Lossie

ABOUT ORTS

The word orts means scraps, or fragments of food left after a meal. The newsletter Orts depends upon contributions from its readers, so please send your morsels this way. Orts welcomes submissions: if you wish to share an article, announcement, notice, or news, please contact the Orts editor, Dr. Jennifer Koopman, at ortseditor@gmail.com, or the GMS chairman, Richard Lines, at 38 South Vale, Upper Norwood, London, SE19 3BA, r.lines878@btinternet.com.