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A Tale of Two Families

Robert Cecil

Sixty years ago, when my sisters and I were growing up at Southbourne, midway between Bournemouth and Christchurch, there were always books by George MacDonald in the house, even though the time was already past when he was a popular writer. We paid him our tribute of youthful respect largely because of a family connection of long standing. It had begun in 1851, when my grandfather, Henry Cecil, then aged twenty, was a teacher at Stonegrove, near Sheffield, and a colleague there of John MacDonald, younger brother of the poet and novelist. The two teachers read together the poems of George, which at that date were circulating only in manuscript, and Henry, who himself had aspirations as a poet, determined to make the acquaintance of the elder brother as soon as circumstances allowed. The first meeting probably took place before John left Stonegrove in July 1853 and went to Russia. He had acquired a horror of school-mastering; in September 1857 he wrote to Henry, who was then tutoring near Newbury:

“I do not think anything short of absolute and insufferable hunger would prevail on me to enter again the ranks of the public preceptors.”¹

School-mastering did not reclaim John; in July 1858 he died of consumption, aged only 28. Henry tried to enshrine his friend’s memory in two sonnets, included in a book of poems published later that year by Smith, Elder and Co. It will be recalled that the same firm in the same year published George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*. We can approximately date the meeting of George and Henry from a letter written by the latter in January 1877 to one of his brothers:

“Lily, my old baby friend in arms, has grown a very fine unselfish eldest sister of the large family . . .”

Lily or Lilia, had been born in January 1852 and thus fifteen when Henry was writing; her younger brothers and sisters numbered

1. This and subsequent quotations, except where otherwise indicated, are from letters in the author’s possession. **[end of page 15]**

ten. Henry had married more recently; his two boys were still infants, but his daughter Lucy, born in 1867, was old enough to look up to Lilia and

was often in and out of “Corage,” the MacDonalds’ house on the borders of Boscombe and Bournemouth. The same sad cause had brought both families to a neighbourhood where sea air and pine trees were supposed to provide a healthy environment for those suffering the scourge of tuberculosis. The sufferer in the MacDonald family, when they moved there in 1875, was the second daughter, Mary; her illness was the more tragic in that in the previous year she had become engaged to Edward Hughes, a promising young artist and nephew of the better known Pre-Raphaelite painter, Arthur Hughes, who illustrated some of MacDonald’s books.

The sufferer in Henry’s family was his wife, another Mary, whose illness had led them to leave the more severe climate of Birkenhead, where my father had been born in 1872. They had bought a house on the Old Christchurch Road, linking Boscombe and Bournemouth, and were delighted to welcome the MacDonalds as near neighbours. When Mary Cecil finally succumbed in July 1876, the MacDonalds were most supportive. Henry wrote of them to one of his brothers:

“I have been seeing them and no-one else. One cannot *help* feeling as if one of the threads of Providence, woven in through their being here, was to stop the awful void in my life with the true and free-flowing sympathies of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

In the month after Mary Cecil’s death MacDonald, who was on a visit to Devonshire, wrote to the sorrowing widower a letter embodying his attitude to death:

“If life has taught us anything it has by this time taught us to deny Death and believe in Life Let the evening of life be lighted by the foreshine of the coming morning. We are near enough to the North of Old Age to be able to see the light of the sun all the night through”

Highly as Henry esteemed MacDonald as friend and comforter, he was not blind to what he regarded as his faults as a novelist. In another letter to his brother he discussed “Thomas Wingfold, Curate,” which had been published in 1876: [16]

“I perfectly agree with you in regret at the perfervid penny dreadful element in Wingfold, but I don’t think it is fair to forget that a story to him is not simply art but *bread*”

Henry was an admirer of the talent for acting of the MacDonald family; this seems first to have displayed itself in the dramatic games played by large families, variously designated “Styles,” “Epigrams,” “Character Sketches”

and the like. In the same letter to his brother Henry wrote:

“I have seen them several times in charades and Proverbs, both at home and at the Town-Hall, and their personifications are wonderfully good.”

The good days at Boscombe were not destined to last. By the autumn of 1877 it was clear that Mary MacDonald’s health would not stand another winter in England and Louisa, her mother, took her to Italy, where her father joined them towards the end of the year. Mary passed the last winter of her life at the Villa Cattaneo, Nervi, where she died at the end of April 1878. Two weeks, later MacDonald wrote:

“Ah, my dear friend, we better understand your mental condition and feelings than we did before. Our child is gone from us, but we are following after, and I shall hold her yet again to my soul.”

So firmly did he hold to the certainty of family reunion in another life that on another page of the same letter he describes Mary’s death as “the widening of our family chain.” Louisa added a brief postscript, promising to return a quilt loaned by Henry:

“It was a daily comfort to her weary little body and we often talked of you as the lender. Poor Ted [Hughes] is at Siena. He has been wonderful . . . wonderful.”

The quilt had been a minor benefaction, compared to the two ponies, Zoe and Zephyr, which Henry had given to the MacDonalds after his wife’s death. The ponies had drawn the trap, in which he had taken his invalid wife for country drives; they figure in “Paul Faber, Surgeon,” which appeared in 1879. When the MacDonalds went to Italy, they passed on the ponies to Ellen Gurney, whose husband, Russell Gurney, the London Recorder, had recently died.

We do not know what [17] happened to Zoe, but Zephyr survived till 1887. MacDonald received news of the pony’s demise from Mrs Gurney, whom he described as “a most loving mistress”; she had mounted one of Zephyr’s hooves in silver, transforming it into an inkstand. MacDonald proposed to have it inscribed with the pony’s age, which, as he suggested in his letter to Henry, must have been over forty.

The MacDonalds’ decision to spend a great part of the year in Italy added to their financial embarrassment, which was seldom much below the surface. They had “Corage” on a lease that did not expire for another three years, and in November 1879 MacDonald wrote:

“We have almost lost all hope of letting ‘Corage,’ and must just

bear the burden. We shall not go back to it if we can help it.”

In the following year the itinerant family put down roots in Bordighera and the correspondence between there and Boscombe dwindled to an annual exchange around Christmas and New year. As MacDonald wrote in January 1889,

“I should have much to tell you if I saw you, but you can imagine how one who writes as his profession shrinks from letters”

Such letters as he did write usually included enquiries after Henry’s children. Unhappily not all was well; at the end of 1889 Henry’s eldest son, Willie, had a severe breakdown and was put under medical care. One stormy afternoon in January 1890 he walked out of the house and was not seen again alive; one month later his body was found in the estuary near Christchurch. This sad event elicited a letter of sympathy from Bordighera:

“It is well to say ‘The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away,’ but it is not enough. We must add ‘and the Lord will give again’ This great desire in and for us and for himself in us is the unity of love. The bond is henceforth closer between you and your son.”

MacDonald appended the following poem;

To give a thing and take again
Is counted meanness among men;
Still less to take what once is given
Can be the royal way of heaven! **[18]**
But human hearts are crumbly stuff
And never never love enough;
And so God takes, and, with a smile,
Puts our best things away awhile.
Some therefore weep, some rave, some scorn;
Some wish they never had been born;
Some humble grow at last, and still,
And then God gives them what they will.

This view that love was perfected in death had come to dominate his thoughts about the apparent end of life and its true renewal in another world. We have confirmation of this in what we know of his conversations in Bordighera in the winter of 1884-5 with another consumptive young woman, Laura Tennant, the elder sister of the future Margot Asquith. Laura, when she went to winter in Italy, was already engaged to Alfred Lyttelton, whom she

duly married in May 1885; but she seems to have had a premonition that she would not live long. She spent every evening with the MacDonalds and under their influence, according to Margot's biographer, Daphne Bennett, "Laura was having a dangerous flirtation with death."² She wrote a letter to Margot, which her younger sister found deeply disturbing, in which she quoted MacDonald as having said, "that the only way lovers can meet is in God and that in him alone they can be one." Mrs Bennett regards this as morbid, as no doubt many other contemporary commentators would do. MacDonald, however, would have thought it less dangerous for a sick woman to "flirt with death" than for her to "flirt with life" without paying due regard to the need to prepare her mind for the great transition into the afterlife. Laura's marriage lasted less than a year.

Henry died in November 1899; but the family connection did not die with him. My father, Charles Cecil, occasionally saw MacDonald at his new home, St. George's Wood, Haslemere, where he died in 1905. Cecil was also a friend of Dr Greville MacDonald, the ear, nose and throat specialist, who stood godfather to my elder sister. It is

2. Margot by Daphne Bennett (Gollancz 1984) p. 57. [19]

this continuing contact that leads me to give credence to an oral tradition that throws light on a puzzling event in Greville's life, which for a time upset his relations with his father and mother. In March 1888 Greville married Phoebe Winn, an older woman, who was matron at the hospital where they both worked. William Raeper writes of his marriage:

"The family were solidly opposed to her—perhaps because she was 'only' a nurse—or that she had somehow trapped Greville in her clutches."³

The latter explanation carries more weight, since social snobbery was wholly alien to George MacDonald's character. According to our family tradition, Phoebe was in love with Greville, who had no wish to get married. Her chance came one winter's night, when both had been detained late at the hospital, dealing with an urgent case. It had begun to snow heavily by the time Greville was free to go home and only one cab-driver could be found, who was willing to brave the conditions. The matron would normally have stayed overnight at the hospital, but she pleaded that she must visit her sick mother and, as the latter's home was in the same direction and no other transport was available, Greville agreed that she should share his cab. Before

either destination had been reached, the cab came to a halt in a snowdrift and the driver refused to go further until dawn broke or the snow ceased. Greville and Phoebe accordingly spent the night, innocently enough, in the back of the cab.

Today it would be considered absurd for such a misadventure to result in a loveless marriage; but it was otherwise in the middle-class in the last century. Any woman who passed a night in a man's company without a female chaperone was compromised; she was "damaged goods" and had lost much of her value in the marriage market. Greville, who had a strong sense of propriety and chivalry, surely believed it to be his duty to marry Phoebe. His family, on the other hand, would have regarded his self-immolation as too great a sacrifice and probably as showing excessive deference to conventional morality.

3. *George MacDonald* by William Raeper (Lion Publishing 1987) p. 357. [20]

Greville was still living at St. George's Wood when I last saw him in 1938. I recall a courteous old man with short, white beard and ear-trumpet, living happily with his adopted daughter, Molly. She was much younger than he and had originally come to him as a patient, a mute, on whom he had performed an operation that enabled her to speak in a whisper. At that point the association of the two families, however intermittent, had spanned three generations. [21]