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N&Q

George MacDonald as Rock Star?

John Pennington

We all remember the chapter “Nanny’s Dream” from *At the Back of the North Wind*: Nanny finds herself inside the moon where she looks at “such lots of stars, all so big, and shining as hard as ever they could!” Diamond tells her that “the little girl-angels had been polishing them,” which prompts Nanny to state: “What nonsense you do talk!”

Maybe I am talking a bit of nonsense equating MacDonald to a rock star. But there is one rock star who aligns himself with MacDonald, finding inspiration for his music in the Victorian writer. So maybe MacDonald is a rock star after all!

Mike Scott, the leader of the Scottish band The Waterboys, has been channeling MacDonald’s spirit into his music for years. In its 2003 album *Universal Hall*, The Waterboys sing

in this library I could lose myself
transports, gateways on every shelf
dark words, bright words or ice and fire
as if an angel did descend and use the writer as a pen
for here are “avalon of the heart”
“flight into freedom”
macdonald’s “lilith” and “fantastes” [sic]
lewis’s “perelandra”

The refrain of the song is the following: “*i sacrifice my power on the altar of your love / that it may be born again on another world.*” The song also uses the images of the stairs and tower, which is most certainly a homage to MacDonald.

In a 1998 interview in *Waves*, Scott talks about his influences, particularly MacDonald and C. S. Lewis. When Scott discloses that he is a great fan of Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*, the interviewer mentions the importance of MacDonald to that work. “I’d read George MacDonald long before,” says Scott. “*Phantastes* was my first one I read in 1983. I remember reading it in the Portobello Hotel in London.” Scott’s discovering of MacDonald should remind us of Lewis’s first foray into *Phantastes*, which he claims baptized his imagination. Scott seems to be following in Lewis’s footsteps.

The Waterboys’ most obvious indebtedness to MacDonald can be found

in its 1990 album *Room to Roam*, which is named after a MacDonald poem found in *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. In the song “Room to Roam,” Scott modifies MacDonald’s lyrics to read as follows:

You go yours
and I’ll go mine
the many ways we wend
Many days
and many ways
ending in one end
Many a wrong
and its curing song
Many a road
and many an inn

Refrain

Room to roam
but only one home
for all the word to win

You go yours
and I’ll go mine
and the many many ways we’ll wend
Many days
and many ways
ending in one end

MacDonald’s poem appears in Chapter XLII: “I Sleep the Sleep” in *Lilith*, where Vane tells us that he

heard every word she sang, but could keep only this:—

Many a wrong, and its curing song;
Many a road, and many an inn;

Room to roam, but only one home
For all the world to win!”

And I thought I had heard the song before.

Maybe The Waterboys’ Mike Scott is a disciple of Anodos and Vane, those two wanderers that MacDonald gives plenty of narrative room for them to roam.

Note: in *Poetical Works: Volume II* MacDonald has a poem entitled “Room to Roam,” but it is quite different from the *Phantastes* and *Lilith* one:

STRAIT is the path? He means we must not roam?

Yes; but the strait path leads into a boundless home.

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“I felt two large, soft arms thrown round me from behind” *Phantastes*. 1905 ed. Dover. Illustrated by Arthur Hughes.