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# A Retrospective on George MacDonald: Poet, Novelist, Preacher

Roderick McGillis

**I**n his own day George MacDonald was a public personality and a well-known literary figure. Many of the leading critical journals printed long articles on his work, and he was considered “one of the most popular authors of the day” (*London Quarterly Review*, 1869, 402). During the 1860s and 1870s MacDonald’s friends included John Ruskin, Arthur Hughes, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), Henry Sutton, Sir Noel Paton, and F. D. Maurice. In 1872, he followed Dickens and Thackeray to America. He had, and continues to have, a following of enthusiastic admirers who look to him as their teacher and prophet. At the height of his success he was regarded as “something of a god,” and one report tells of how “when the great man preached in Queen’s Cross Free Church” one member of the audience, after failing to find a seat, “heard the sermon from a cubby hole that the beadle occupied beneath the pulpit” (A. K. 1937). We have many other examples of this type of veneration. G. K. Chesterton speaks for MacDonald’s followers when he calls him the sage, the “sayer of things” (Chesterton 6). He pictures MacDonald walking about “the streets of some Greek or eastern village with a long white beard, simply saying what he had to say” (6). MacDonald, with his warmth and sincerity, exercised lasting influence on many who came into contact with him, either personally or through his writing. As evangelist, MacDonald’s success is, if not as famous, certainly as effective as Wordsworth’s. In his own lifetime he helped many who were in despair. After MacDonald’s death, R. W. Gilder wrote:

Ah, loving, exquisite, enraptured soul,  
Who wert to me a father and a friend;  
Who imaged and brought near, all humanly,  
The sweetness and the majesty of him  
Who in Judea melted human hearts,  
And won the world by loveliness and love.  
(*Century Magazine* 276)

For D. C. Murray, MacDonald appeared as a prophet and leader of men: “[he] has been to many a Moses in the speculative desert, leading to a land of promise” (116). Those deeply affected by reading MacDonald’s works include Chesterton, Coulson Kernahan, and C. S. Lewis. At a moment of personal crisis, advice from MacDonald changed the course of Ernest Rhys’s life. In his *Wales England Wed*, Rhys remembers:

It was George MacDonald, whose Highland tales had a fascination for me, who, by a lucky chance at this turning point, became my lode-star. After reading some poems he published in a little volume called *Violin Songs*, I decided to venture on sending him some verses and telling him of my scheme to give up mining and take to writing in London. After an interval he wrote back a most sympathetic and critically kind letter, singling out one line in all the poems that seemed to him to show the poet's imaginative touch. (62-63)

It was not long before MacDonald became Rhys's "mentor and intimate critic."

The praises MacDonald received from various voices are the nimbus of a saint: they often obscure the man in the light of worship. An American, Edward Eggleton, said of him: "He has more of the spirit of the Christ than any man I ever met" (qtd in Gilder, *Letters* 57). A. J. Church, who first saw MacDonald at St. Peter's Church, Vere Street, reported that "He was kneeling at the rails of the communion table, and I seemed to be looking at the Christ as painters have represented him. The face might have been a canvas of Raphael or Francis translated into flesh and blood" (429). For R. R. Bowker, "George MacDonald is, and looks like, a prophet-poet of the old type translated into modern life" (17). MacDonald's physical appearance constituted a large part of his charisma, and the image of that appearance comes down to later generations. C. S. Lewis, for example, envisages MacDonald as "a very tall man, almost a giant, with a flowing beard. . . Here was an enthroned and shining god, whose ageless spirit weighed upon mine like a burden of solid gold: and yet, at the very same moment, here was an old weather-beaten man, one who might have been a shepherd" (*The Great Divorce* 59). A contemporary of MacDonald's, someone known as "Paladin," described MacDonald as "a tall, impressive-looking man, a little high-shouldered, and not without a tendency to Scottish gauntness, the head well shaped, the features fine, the whole expression noble. Hair long and flowing to the shoulders, full beard and moustache, which, like the hair of the head, was grizzled" (187-188). MacDonald was five feet, ten and a half inches tall.

MacDonald's influence on others possessed a "mystical Quality: to come within it was to be convinced" (Greville MacDonald, *GMDW* 116). Wilson Carlile, using a metaphor derived from electricity, believed MacDonald "to be in touch with the beyond—himself a live wire to make its presence felt, even without his burning words" (unpublished letter to Greville, Dec. 12, 1922, King's College, Aberdeen). Those "burning words" moved fellow writers well into the twentieth century, including such figures as J. C. Powys, W. H. Auden, J. B. Priestley, and Louis MacNeice. Powys, for example, asserted that MacDonald's books "did much to thicken out my life illusion" (106). To his followers, MacDonald remains a "Child, Lover, Saint"

(*The Times* Dec. 10, 1905, 16), the “St. Francis of Aberdeen” (Chesterton, Introduction to *GMDW* 14), or “the Blessed St. Mac” (*Memorials of William Cowper-Temple* 83). This is how he has been remembered, and this is the image he fashioned for himself. For him, the role of poet included aspects of prophet, preacher, and mystic, and so perfectly fulfilled the expectations of his mid-Victorian audience. “I have heard him say,” wrote the Rev. W. C. Horder, “that every real poet was a Seer—a man who saw more than others” (357).

Objective views of MacDonald are rare. Greville MacDonald, MacDonald’s eldest son, provides us with a hagiography, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (1924). This long book is the first complete record of MacDonald’s life, and it remains influential. But Greville is cautious and selective in reproducing his father’s letters. With a typically nineteenth-century anxiety to preserve his father’s ideals, he perpetuates the myth of a saint. Greville himself emerges from the book as a disciple. Indeed, he spent much of his time between 1905, the year his father died, and 1924 writing prefaces to reprints of his father’s work. In 1904, he published the long philosophical work, *The Tree in the Midst*. There, as a man of science, Greville attempted to come to terms with scientifically unverifiable truths. At times, however, the voice we hear from the pages of Greville’s book is that of his father (the same is true of Greville’s later work, *The Child’s Imagination* [1910]). The ideas and vocabulary in the following passages are less Greville than George:

The poet truly creates, while the man of science dissects and classifies the facts of life. (13)

The poet is nothing if not a lover of men; and he who but analyses and gives expression to his glimpses of truth for the sake of fame or self-adulation is but casting pearls before his own swinehood. Because the poet has seen he must reveal, that his brothers and sisters may rejoice with the joy he has found. (24)

The individual man starts at the very beginning of the growth of life, ascending through all the essential steps in the evolution of the species, although making no divergences such as are necessitated for the production of lower types, until he attains the perfection of his parents’ form. (45)

Wherever we have obedience there must we have corresponding profundity of truth and elevation of beauty. (65)

Greville's view of art echoes his father's: he praises the symbolic and criticizes the allegoric and realistic. Imagination is central to his thought, as it is to his father's. For both MacDonalds, it is "the candle of the Lord" (*A Dish of Orts* 25; *Reminiscences* 366). Greville argued for the use of fairy tales in education since they kept the imagination active. Like his father and John Ruskin, Greville admired the craftsman, and he was a founding member of the Peasant Arts Guild. George MacDonald's noblest fictional characters are shoemakers, bookbinders, carpenters, and blacksmiths. Greville assented to this notion of the heroism of the contemporary craftsman, but under the influence of Ruskin and William Morris, he found his ideal rather in the medieval counterpart:

The craftsman strove for a passionate union between work and play that exalted comradeship, and, awakening sense of beauty, made all hearts joyful. Your mason became a child again when he realized that his corbels had other work than carrying the church roof. Without robbing them of their mechanical utility . . . the mason carves each stone with an angelic form that all who see it shall be happy and be led perhaps beyond the roof out into the starry domains of adventure and joy. ("The Spirit of Play" 364)

The analogy between child and artist is typical of George MacDonald.

Although a man of letters in his own right, Greville nevertheless followed his father's footsteps. At twenty he journeyed to Switzerland where, like his father before him, he experienced an Alpine revelation. Throughout his life, he says, the vision of the Matterhorn "has remained with me as a fact of 'profoundest significance,' bringing conviction more nearly divine than any priestly dogma or *even the teachings of my father*" (*Reminiscences* 56. My italics). Greville fulfilled his father's early ambition: he became a successful throat specialist at the Throat Hospital, Golden Square. Much later, he also became a writer of fairy stories. These are weak and unimaginative, the plots disjointed and confused, but they again reveal his father's influence. In *Trystie's Quest* (1912), the sheep dog is Curdie; the nasty Pigwidgeons take refuge in a bad old ash tree; their land has no water; there is a grandmother in a tower; and there is a Chamber of Death where babies sprout wings. The idea of a mystic thread that leads the female hero out of a labyrinthine forest appears in another story, *Jack and Jill: A Fairy Story* (1913). The illustrator of these books is Arthur Hughes, well-known as the illustrator of George MacDonald's fairy stories.

And so we cannot doubt that Greville's portrait of his father is idealized. With the help of unpublished material and contemporary journals and letters, the following review of MacDonald's life attempts to give a more rounded sense of his personality. It also supplements the biography at several places, notably in discussing MacDonald's early poetry, the *Pilgrim's*

*Progress* productions (which Greville seems to have disapproved of), MacDonald's reputation, and life at Casa Corragio in Bordighera, Italy, where MacDonald spent the last part of his life.

George MacDonald was born in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, on December 10, 1824. He was the second son of George and Helen MacDonald, and he was raised on a farm not far from the village. As a small boy, between two and three, his "earliest definable memory," so he wrote in 1880, was the funeral of the Duke of Gordon (*A Dish of Orts* 43). Death was a constant presence in his life: his mother died of tuberculosis when he was eight years old, and only three years earlier his brother John Mackay had died in childbirth. The death of MacDonald's mother prompts Robert Lee Wolff to read MacDonald's personality from a Freudian perspective. Wolff uses the fact that all his life MacDonald kept a letter in which his mother expressed her reluctance to wean him as evidence of an Oedipal complex. Her death "dealt him a wound that never healed" (13). In contradiction to C. S. Lewis who saw in MacDonald an "anti-Freudian predicament in operation" (*George MacDonald* 11), Wolff argues that he "felt a rebellion against his father, whom he also loved dearly, and this gave him deep feelings of guilt" (372). Whether or not Wolff's conjecture is right is irrelevant to an appreciation of MacDonald's work. Wolff reads backwards from the books to the life; he interprets the man and not the work. He also ignores such statements as MacDonald's dedication of *Poems* (1857) to his father:

Thou hast been faithful to my highest need:  
And I, thy debtor, ever, evermore,  
Shall never feel the grateful burden sore.  
Yet most I thank thee, not for any deed,  
But for the sense thy living self did breed  
That fatherhood is at the world's great core.  
(*Poetical Works* vol. 1 134)

And he misunderstands Lewis's point that an almost perfect relationship with his father was the earthly root of all his wisdom. From his own father, he said, he first learned that Fatherhood must be at the core of the Universe. He was thus prepared in an unusual way to teach that religion in which the relations of Father and Son is of all relations the most central. (*George MacDonald* 10)

The father in MacDonald's writings often represents God, and the search for Him is religious rather than psychological. That this God is androgynous, as Wolff suggests, is consistent with the tradition in which Wolff rightly places MacDonald, that of Novalis and Boehme. Jacob Boehme writes: "Adam was a complete image of God, male and female, and nevertheless neither of them

separately, but pure like a chaste virgin” (*Personal Christianity* 196).

But the “hatred for mankind” that Wolff finds in MacDonald’s writing is manufactured (374). MacDonald shows great tolerance and kindness to many of his reprobate characters, and in his own life he was active in helping the poor, visiting the sick, taking in vagabonds, giving a home to a destitute mother and her children, and providing food and entertainment for working-class people in London and in Bordighera. The violence that disturbs Wolff is not an unusual feature of Victorian literature. There is more brutality in Christina Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) or in Lucy Clifford’s *Anyhow Stories* (1882) than anything in MacDonald’s own fairy stories.

As a child, MacDonald wandered the hills about Huntly and investigated the great castle with its black dungeon and marvelous spiral staircase that climbs into the sky from the ruins of a great tower. The countryside of his youth provided material for much of MacDonald’s later work, and in *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), we have an explicit description of Huntly Castle’s dungeon and stair. Alec and Kate,

entered by the door in the great tower, under the spiky remnants of the spiral stair projecting from the huge circular wall. To the right, a steep descent, once a stair, led down to the cellars and the dungeon; a terrible place, the visible negations of which are horrid, and need no popular legends such as Alec had been telling Kate, of a walled-up door and a lost room, to add to their influence. (232)

The spiral staircase and the tower are important in MacDonald’s iconography.

MacDonald was a serious child who, at 13, was president of the Huntly Juvenile Temperance Society. Very early he acquired the desire to preach, and he once berated the maid for being a reprobate beyond redemption. He not only sat in judgment, but he also dispensed punishment. On his return from school one day, the young MacDonald saw a smaller boy maltreating a calf. He approached the boy, asked him to hold his coat, and then proceeded to thrash the offender with an umbrella (Milne 6).

In 1840, MacDonald entered King’s College, Aberdeen. Here he studied Chemistry, Natural Philosophy, and modern literature and languages. At various times he contemplated going to Germany to further his scientific training, or to study medicine, both of which he had to forego because of financial restrictions. The teaching standards in Aberdeen in MacDonald’s time were not high, as the Rev. Robert Troup testifies:

It was a time when the decrepitude of the University Professors stood in strong contrast to the vigorous intellectual life of the students. The Professors of Humanity, Greek, Mathematics, and Moral Philosophy were all feeble old men with antiquated methods of teaching. Dr. Patrick Forbes, known as “Prosody,” whose only enthusiasm was for the subjunctive mood: Dr. Hugh Macpherson, called “Habby,” who

in his later days was believed by the students  
to be kept embalmed while assistants did his work . . . . (xi)

Troup was a fellow student of MacDonald's at King's College, and he later married MacDonald's cousin.

At college, MacDonald was much alone. Greville tells us that in Aberdeen his father "lived in much real loneliness" (*GMDW* 80). In his testimonial letter in support of MacDonald's application for the Chair of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh in 1865, Sir William Geddes recalls MacDonald's student days: "Though you did not mix much with other students at college, and, indeed, hardly cared to descend into the ordinary arena of emulation, your fellow-students were not unaware of the talents you possessed" (*Testimonials* 16-17). And the Rev. Troup recollects MacDonald "sitting by himself after the meal was over, silent and thoughtful, sometimes apparently musing, and sometimes reading while the others were talking" (qtd in *GMDW* 78). This introspective attitude betokens an inferiority complex evident in MacDonald throughout his life.

The years at King's College were crucial for the development of MacDonald's sense of identity, for it was now that he thought of becoming a poet. A Byronic figure, MacDonald could be seen walking "backwards and forwards" on the North Sea shore "amid the howling winds and the beating spray, with the waves coming up to our [MacDonald and a fellow student] feet; and all the time he went on addressing the sea and the waves and the storm" (qtd in *GMDW* 80). At this time, he also discovered the German and English Romantic writers. During the summer months of 1842, MacDonald catalogued a library in the North of Scotland. The location of this "certain castle" is unclear, but Greville claims that, "its importance in my father's education cannot be questioned" (73). Greville's "strong suspicion" is that the library was at Thurso Castle, owned by the Sinclair family. It had "a fine library, and its owner in 1842 was Sir George Sinclair, son of the first baronet, Sir John . . . a great linguist and collector of German literature, which fact tallies with the account of the library in *The Portent*" (*GMDW* 73; see also *The Portent* 37).

C. S. Lewis suggests that "it was here that [MacDonald] first came under the influence of German Romanticism" (*George MacDonald* 13). The possibility is real enough, but MacDonald was a modern language student at King's College and may have learned German there. He may even have worked in the college library. A letter from the Keeper of Manuscripts informs me that "students were employed as assistants at certain times" in the College Library from 1839 to 1850, but no lists remain. In *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, a novel that both Greville and Wolff use for biographical evidence of the library in the far north, Alec works in his college library, and he also falls in love with his cousin Kate. Wolff believes, with Lewis, that in the



mysterious northern library MacDonald “read widely in the English poets and discovered the German authors, chiefly the romantics, perhaps first through Carlyle’s essays and translations, but soon enough through the originals” (16). Because library scenes appear in many of MacDonald’s books, Wolff concludes that it was in the northern library that “he fell in love, with a girl somewhat older than he, a member of the family that owned the castle and the library. She led him on a certain distance, and then rejected him because she felt him to be of an inferior social class” (16). We have no evidence to support this contention.

The library in so many of MacDonald’s novels is a metaphor, just as it is for Jorge Luis Borges. Borges’s “Library of Babel” is the image of the universe in which a variety of sects throughout the ages have erected systems to find and to codify all knowledge, to find the ultimate book and so on. This library images the confusion and impenetrability of the cosmos. MacDonald’s libraries are not so grand. They are most often emblems of their owners’ spiritual states. But they are also compared to spiritual growth in general. Malcolm MacPhail, one of MacDonald’s eponymous characters, says, “A leebrary canna be made a’ at once, any mair nor a hoose, or a nation, or a muckle tree: *they* maun a’ tak time to grow, an’ sae maun a leebrary” (*Malcolm* 210). At the same time, libraries are emblems of mutability; they suggest years of owners who have died leaving their possessions, possessions which “like a moving panorama” have “passed from before many eyes” (*Lilith* 2).

While in Aberdeen, MacDonald wrote poetry, much of it dedicated to his beautiful cousin, Helen MacKay. The two cousins formed a deep attachment. Helen later said that she helped him “when he was puzzled and undecided as to what life he was fit for,” and he confided to her his ambition to be a poet (*GMDW* 84). With his cousin as his muse and his discovery of the Romantic poets—MacDonald had copied *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and portions of Shelley’s *Wandering Jew* for Helen (*GMDW* 80)—he found his themes of spiritual unrest, search, and communion with nature which pervade his later work. One unpublished early poem from the MSS. Book given to Helen Mackay and dated 1840-1-2 is clumsy, loose, and less than clear; it hardly prefigures the later poetry except in the imaginative recreation of Biblical subjects. Glenn Sadler suggests that the theme of this early poem is “the descent of Christ into hell to liberate the righteous dead.” The poem, Sadler continues, “depicts the king’s struggle with worldly powers and His triumphant defeat of Death” (Sadler, “Cosmic Vision” 45-46). It seems to me, however, that MacDonald’s theme is the death of the King of Babylon, and his arrival in Hell as depicted in Isaiah 14:4-21.

The gloomy kings of Hades sit, each one upon his throne.  
A lurid fire in every eye, on each brow a sulken frown.

Slowly they raise themselves, and from their gleaming eyes a blaze  
 Of deeper flame glares forth, as on Babylon's king they gaze;  
 And each arm is raised in mockery, and o'er each countenance past,  
 As of scorn and hate, and triumph, a mingled burning blast;  
 For Hell is moved to meet him, and greet his noiseless head  
 With homage from the shadowy forms of its thousand mighty dead:  
 The captive pays such homage when the conqueror's in the chain  
 That bound him to the chariot wheel, when he followed in his train:  
 Greet thou who once encompassed with the tempest of thy wrath,  
 O'erturnedst thrones and crowned heads, along thy thorny path:  
 While other kings in glory lie, each in his silent tomb,  
 And o'er them stately trophies rise, with sculptured sword and plume,  
 The earth, which takes her wearied ones back to her sheltering breast,  
 Hath cast *thee* out, as all unfit to share with them their rest.  
 No mournful notes of solemn dirges in sorrow o'er thee pour,  
 But earth re-echoes with a song—her slavery now is o'er:  
 And kings that wont to look on thee with terror in their eyes,  
 Now gaze upon thy lowly corpse, and calmly pass thee by.  
 Once in the heaven's thy natal star as morning's son shone bright,  
 But it gladdened not the nations with a glance of playful light;  
 But its glare was as the fire of hell, and not (e'en) like blood it rose,  
 Or as the flames of cities proud, when fired by fiendish foes.  
 And now amidst the infernal stars, conspicuous o'er the rest  
 It gems the dome of hell's dark hall, in the realms of the unblest.  
 And thou art welcome here, proud king: behold thy star—and now  
 Ascend thy lofty throne—ah! No—thou stoopest and veilest thy  
 brow. (*First Fruits and Fragments*)

The lengthy seven-foot lines have their faults, and perhaps the alliteration is somewhat overdone. The poem is an *etude*, an exercise for the young poet. But even this early MacDonald prophecies the release of the earth from bondage.

Another much longer poem, also unpublished and written in MacDonald's final months in Aberdeen—it is dated September 26, 1844—is profoundly expressive of MacDonald's state of mind, his loneliness, spiritual uncertainty, and melancholy. In the first and second stanzas, the romantic intimacy with night, which MacDonald encountered in Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* and Shelley's "To Night," overcomes the boy's *ennui*:

1.

Tis night—the boy his watch is keeping,  
 In silence alone;  
 All else that are near him in quiet are sleeping,  
 Soundly each one:—

But his couch that is by him is yet unprest,  
 And thought is yet busy within his breast,  
 As he sitteth so quietly there.  
 Why sitteth he there in that ancient chair,  
 Silent and moving none—  
 As tho' terror's hand with her magic wand  
 Had frozen him into stone?  
 I cannot tell but he sitteth there,  
 Though the stars could hardly see  
 By their own dim light in the look he doth wear,  
 That terror it could not be:  
 For the stars of the night, with their dreary light,  
 Are the only lamps he hath;  
 And tenderly on him sparkles each gem,  
 As it loved him as he loves them;  
 And ever on their path,  
 They seem to his eyes to linger awhile,  
 To gaze thro's his windowed smile.

## 2.

And on he sat, his thoughts so lost in a thought,  
 That he was conscious of existence only  
 In its intensity, and reckoned not  
 Of his soul's dwelling place which was so lonely.

Nature is invested with the spirit of life; the stars look lovingly on the boy.  
 But despite the oneness with the night and nature, doubt exists as to the  
 possibility of attaining truth on earth:

he joyous sprung  
 Up from his place of dreams, and clothed him in  
 His wonted garb, and hurried forth to mingle in the din  
 Of the mad elements which round him swung.  
 For he loved storms and darkness; and the ecstasy  
 Of his full heart on the surge  
 Of the wind billows, and in madness of delight  
 Seemed the fierce combatant to urge  
 On—on—to fiercer fight . . .

We remember the young MacDonald's walks by the North Sea. The passage  
 is the first of many such scenes in MacDonald's published works: for  
 example, storm sequences appear in *A Seaboard Parish* (1868), *Wilfrid*

*Cumbermede* (1872), and *Sir Gibbie* (1879).

The dominant theme, however, is mutability and death represented at one time by ruins of past civilizations and then by the sea. Neither art nor the artist is eternal. In stanza fourteen, the poet tells the reader to,

go amid the ruins of the West.  
Where o'er the temple fallen the grass hath grown,  
And woven a shroud for it, in which to rest  
In the wide forest-tomb that's o'er it thrown.  
Thy nature built for art—wherein the lone  
And voiceless solitude, where nought is spied  
Save trees from youth to eld—in ages gone  
Genius gave birth to Art—and both have died;  
And Fame did promise Immortality and lied.

All that remains of the artist is “a little heap of dust” (stanza sixteen). The sea, powerful symbol of change, is a fitting burial ground controlled as it is by the light of the benign moon:

The full pale moon arose: her silver glance  
Shone on the motionless and breathless wave,  
As though her ghostly look had in a trance  
Spell-bound the waters, which like cowering slave  
Before her lay. Oh! There was many a grave  
That she might gaze on here! She loved the dead,  
And o'er the coffinless and tombless brave,  
No hideous grave-stone marking out their bed,  
Obstructs the rays she throws—a fit light o'er them shed.

Besides the predilection for night, the use of the moon here is important because MacDonald continually refers to her, as does Coleridge in *The Ancient Mariner*, as a kindly attendant spirit. She shines on the many dead in the cosmic cemetery in *Lilith*. The image of the sea controlled by the moon is a compelling representation of change and renewal, life and death, fury and peace watched over by a shining God. The poem ends with a death wish, the desire of the poet to return to the maternal sea:

Bury me, bury me lone,  
Where no dirge is sung, and no music plays  
In echoes round my sepulchral stone,  
And only funeral lays  
Be the hollow moan, in its rocky caves  
Of ocean awakening its thousand waves.

The poem as a whole is confused. It attempts Gothic melodrama: the *mise en scene* contains the usual castle looming ghostly in the dark; a strange encounter occurs in the night; a death knoll sounds; a lord dies and an heir flees for reasons that never do come clear; the entire mixture is diluted

with musings on time and change and a romantic *weltschmerz*. The phrasing is often overblown: “big rain” and its “ever pouring gush” drench the boy, and the elements “swing” about him. The poem does, however, prefigure MacDonald’s later themes and images, and it contains at least one example of his imaginative vision: the rain beats so furiously that it seemed as if “each cloud / Was striving with its rain the wind to quell.”

While at college, and indeed, all his life, MacDonald dressed self-consciously. He wore a radiant tartan coat that William Geddes describes as “the most dazzling affair in dress I ever saw a student wear, but characteristic of the young Celtic minstrel” (Geddes, “The ‘Minstrel’” 16). Although poor, MacDonald was always fastidious in his choice of clothes, and his appearance enhanced the poetic pose he maintained all his life. A gorgeous new smoking-jacket, a new jewel, or a new cap were always his pride. His son Ronald tells us that his father “had small peculiarities in dress which became part of his personality; waistcoats made always with some twenty small buttons, often gilt, from collar to waist, of which only the highest, beneath his beard, and the four or five lowest were ever fastened over the soft-fronted white shirt. And for choice, at home, the jacket would be brown or black velvet; while in boots, shoes, and socks he was the gentlest but most persistent of the dandies I have known” (78). MacDonald also took delight in fine rings. He possessed an intaglio antique of Psyche “given him by Ruskin as a perfect specimen of late Greek art” (*GMDW* 423), a blood-stone signet, a carbuncle, and a star sapphire. MacDonald’s clothes expressed a certain bohemianism. He was protesting prevailing conventions, expressing an attitude that, for him, was an integral part of the poet’s function. Throughout his life, he wore “his hair a little longer than was latterly usual, his waistcoats fastening up to the low shirt-collar by a close set superfluity of small cloth or sometimes gilt buttons worn open for the middle third” to show his “scarlet cravat” (*GMDW* 76). Even his familiar beard was initially grown at a time when beards were disapproved of, and more than once he shaved it off to please his father or father-in-law. All these accessories, the red tie, velvet jacket, beautiful gems, the flashing buttons and watch chain, and the flowing hair and beard were expressive of the role MacDonald chose to play in his life.

His ambition was strong, and it led him from the small farm in the north east of Scotland to success and fame in the London literary world. Despite a weak constitution (he was tubercular from an early age), he earned money by cataloguing the library in the North, and by teaching arithmetic during the winter of 1843 in the Aberdeen Central Academy. After graduation in 1845, with the degree of M.A., he accepted a tutorship in Fulham where he hoped to earn enough money to repay his Aberdeen debts. A fictional account of this period in his life appears in Book 3 of *David Elginbrod* (1863)

where Hugh Sutherland is tutor to the Appleditch children. MacDonald, like his fictional counterpart, not only disliked the children, but found the middle class pretensions and condescension of the parents insufferable.

During this period, MacDonald was beset with spiritual doubt, as a letter to his father, dated November 1845, indicates:

My greatest difficulty always is “How do I know that my faith is of a lasting kind such as will produce fruits?” My error seems to be always searching for faith in place of contemplating the truths of the gospel which produce faith. My spirit is often very confused. My time does not come to much for reading between one thing and another, but I am improving my mind steadily, though it may be slowly. I am reading just now a recent publication, Darwin’s account of a voyage round the world, which, though in many places too scientific for me as yet, I think you would enjoy very much. (*GMDW* 92-93)

Again, an unpublished poem mirrors MacDonald’s state of mind. This is a verse drama “written during the first months spent in London—1845-6” (*First Fruits and Fragments*). The work, consisting of two acts, has the title, “Gennaro,” and its most obvious affinity is with the poetry of the “Spasmodic School.” “Gennaro” sets out to chronicle Gennaro’s mental history, and the plot, like J. Westland Marston’s *Gerald* (1842), is a succession of climaxes loosely held together. Gennaro is superior to ordinary men, but he has a social conscience. He and his spirit travel through space and ignore time. Like Philip James Bailey’s *Festus* (1839), Gennaro has vast learning and experience: nevertheless he seeks to

Know more, feel more of the unbounded joy  
 Knowledge and power can give: for yet I am not  
 Happier than when I only longed to know  
 And feel what is familiar to me now.

The only other character who speaks is Gennaro’s attendant spirit, the equivalent of Goethe’s Mephistopheles. “Gennaro” begins in a “gothic library.” Gennaro sits “spiritless” gazing upon his wasted countenance in a mirror. The mirror, as in *Lilith*, announces Gennaro’s imminent entry into his own mind. The spirit that speaks to him is the “still small voice” of Tennyson’s “The Two Voices.” Gennaro is a slave, bound to his desire to learn the secrets of the universe; he is the archetypal searcher after the philosopher’s stone.

The setting is an analogue for the protagonist’s mind. Scene two begins in a “long hall of black oak” which is “hung with black” and which has “several windows on each side in deep recesses.” Gennaro extinguishes a small lamp as he prepares to call the “spirit of the voice.” Gennaro’s error is to seek for unnatural knowledge, to abjure faith, to follow his own impulses.

The spirit comes “near thee as thy thought,” and Gennaro asks it for the power to walk unseen in the busy city, and for the power to read peoples’ thoughts and feelings. A spirit that is a “close observer of the ways of men” and who appears as a dark mist, is Gennaro’s guide. This spirit is a variant of the romantic *doppelgänger*—the monster created by Frankenstein, Shelley’s Alastor, or Blake’s Spectre—really one aspect of Gennaro’s own psyche, the cynical, dark side of his mind. MacDonald later creates a more complex and powerful image of the double in *Phantastes* (1958). Gennaro, in a passage typical of MacDonald, reveals himself to be observant and sensitive to the beauties and harmony of nature, but the Spirit immediately negates his vision replacing it with a vision of cruelty, indifference, and anguish. They hear a strange sound which each interprets differently:

Gennaro. ‘Tis the sound of praise,  
 The unceasing anthem which adoring nature  
 Doth with her voices numberless appraise  
 To Him that dwelleth in Immensity,  
 Making Eternity and Space to be.  
 The roaring of a hundred seas; the swaying  
 Of hundreds of old forests to the blast  
 The rush of waters from the rocky heights  
 And thine ear may distinguish in the chaos  
 Of wavy sound, the softest respirations  
 Of breathing earth; the rustling of the grass  
 Upon its slender stem by the lake’s brink.  
 The trembling music of the sleeping bird  
 And the low quivering laugh so musical  
 Of the dear child that dreams of happiness.

Spirit. Are there no [?] from the hungry waves  
 After they have devoured an armament,  
 And ravenous as famine [?], howl for more?  
 Are there no groanings from the giant woods  
 Under the tyrant wind? No child awaking  
 With loud cry in his pain? Wert thou like me,  
 And didst thou hear the sounds of woe and fear  
 The heaving of sad bosoms, the deep sighs  
 Which burst from out the inmost heart of nature,  
 Too deep for sounds inarticulate,—oh, hush—  
 And let me listen—there!—I hear the dash,  
 The plunging of a mighty ship, the swift  
 And strong steed of the watery desert—hark!—  
 I hear the rush of the big wave that sweeps

Its decks that vibrate 'neath the weight of waters,  
 And now I hear the voice of a fair girl—  
 I know her to be fair by that sweet voice—  
 Rising in prayer unheeded midst the tempest;  
 And soon the title of tumbling waves will heave  
 Swoln corpses—one with long, dark, tangled hair—  
 Upon the shore, a tithe to their food-giver.

Gennaro now fears the Spirit, but he resolves to follow it. They continue their course through the sky towards “a mighty city.”

The sounds of the city deafen with the “growl of engines.” The city itself is wrapped in a “hanging pall of smoke” underneath which its streets appear “like the veins / Of some huge animal.” Gennaro and his guide descend to the busy street where people “pass so hurriedly” along this “entrance of grim hell.” This vision of the industrial metropolis with its hideous phantasmagoria of poverty, its brouhaha of harsh sounds, and its mixture of horrid smells is familiar from Dickens, but it is interesting here in revealing the effect of the big city on the twenty-one year old MacDonald; it awakened his social conscience in addition to touching his melancholy spirit. The existence of “Gennaro” belies Greville’s statement that John Ruskin “compelled” MacDonald “to look facts in the face, as regards machinery and industrialism” (*GMDW* 329). The focus, as always in MacDonald, is on the dehumanizing system of class structure in which one social group becomes a tool for the use and gratification of another group, a most ready emblem being the juxtaposition of the society rake with the girl he has ruined. The Spirit takes Gennaro to the room of a wretched girl in exactly this plight; seduced and abandoned and “past the agony of tears.” The Spirit reports that she is reduced to complete torpor,

[she] heedeth not the uproar that is rising  
 With mingled oath and outcries from below.  
 She is past all feeling save of misery;  
 It is her being. Purity fell asleep;  
 And waked,—and she was wretched . . . .

The theme is not new, but it takes on added dimension when set in the squalid rooms of a city tenement, a noisy city street, or the filthy Thameside. In a novel like George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), with its rural setting, the interest is in the complexities of personal relationships and character which lead to the unfortunate affair between Hetty and Arthur; but a similar theme in such Victorian painting as A. L. Egg's *Past and Present* or D. G. Rossetti's *Found* carries a different interest; the city is a prison, confining, insensate, and merciless. The third number in Egg's sequence with the broken basket, the shattered lamp, the derelict boat, the stones, the silhouetted chimneys and wharf poles, and the posters, is full of reminders of the woman's infamy. The



subject of this painting is the city as much as it is the woman's sin.

The scene now switches to a dazzling ballroom, a "glad scene of luxury and light" in which we find the miserable girl's respectable lover with his future bride. Gennaro is incredulous and indignant. He realizes that intervention on his part is useless, and he weakly follows the Spirit to the sea.

MacDonald handles the change in Gennaro's state of mind very skillfully. He concentrates on Gennaro's reactions to the stars. When he first embarks with his guide, he is full of optimism. The stars are "beautiful! My own glorious stars!" A page later, and immediately after running headlong into the barrier of the Spirit's cynicism, Gennaro sees the stars "gleaming faintly in the unsteady stream" and they are "clothed / In the shroud of sadness which envelops all." Now, at the beginning of Act 2, Gennaro sees above only a "few cold stars / That shine so lonely on the desert sky." All is dark and cheerless as Gennaro stands on the edge of the sea of desolation. Confronting the sea, like Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Mists*, Gennaro's "heart swells impatiently, / And he doth long for freedom."

The Spirit returns and leads Gennaro out to sea where they descend to the deck of a merchant ship returning from the east. Here they meet a man who in his youth "longed for knowledge," just like Gennaro, and who, after years of search, attained ultimate truth in a flash of lightning on a mountain top. The man's brow has been touched with joy. The sight of him reminds Gennaro of the "One."

The final scene of this short drama returns to the polluted city where the "dead alone are the untroubled." But here, amid the "vice and misery" Gennaro realizes the pettiness of man's work, its oppressiveness, and he turns to God's works with the imperative: "Let us join the worshippers." By the end of the drama, MacDonald's hero and MacDonald himself, we can surmise, has gained a victory over doubt and depression. After all, during the early part of 1846 MacDonald was introduced into the home of James Powell whose six accomplished daughters made much of the young tutor. One of these daughters, Louisa Powell, married George MacDonald five years later. In February of 1846, MacDonald's first published poem appeared in the *Scottish Congregational Magazine*. This was "David," a poem written while MacDonald was in Aberdeen and included in the MSS. Book he gave to Helen Mackay. Like the other surviving poems from this period, it reveals MacDonald's interest in Biblical subjects. The themes of mutability, fatherly love, and what Ruskin called "pathetic fallacy" are apparent. David mourns for his lost son and forgives him his treachery.

In 1848, MacDonald's position as tutor terminated, and he entered Highbury College to study for the ministry. With a pastorate MacDonald would be able to teach his message, and a message he was more and more certain he had. He once explained how his mission took hold of him:

Thoughts began to burn in me and words to come unbidden, till sometimes I had almost to restrain myself from rising in the pew where I was seated, ascending the pulpit stairs, and requesting the man who had nothing to say to walk down and allow me who had something to say to take his place. (qtd in Robertson-Nicoll 550)

So MacDonald once again fought poverty as well as fatigue, headache, and his constant bronchitis, to complete his course at Highbury. On completion, he accepted a call to Arundel, Sussex, in 1850. Here, according to W. Robertson-Nicoll, MacDonald “made his impression rather as a pastor than as a preacher. His charities were large and unsparing, and in times of sickness he was a constant and helpful visitor” (*Bookman* 118).

The years at Arundel—1850-1853—are instructive with respect to MacDonald’s character. His ideal man is the simple and humble peasant, farmer, or tradesman who is in communion with the soul of life in every object of nature; the type best exemplified by Jesus, and including David Elginbrod, Simon Armour, Sandy Merson, and Mr. Spelt in MacDonald’s fiction. Like Wordsworth, MacDonald felt he could perceive a poetic quality in the common man. How strange, then, to find him writing to his father to complain that,

There are none I would call society for me [in Arundel]—but with my books now and the beautiful earth, and added to these soon, I hope, my wife—and above all that, God to care for me—in whom I and all things are—I do not much fear the want of society . . .  
(*GMDW* 139)

And later, while convalescing at his father-in-law’s home, he writes: “All my spare money I laid out on books—very necessary to do—when going to a country place like Arundel where I can have no society, and no books of any kind except what I have of my own” (*GMDW* 146. MacDonald’s italics). His determination to succeed in the intellectual circles of London and Manchester, and his fervent desire to spread his message limited his self-awareness. His debts continued to mount. After his marriage on March 8, 1851, he accepted a fine house from his father-in-law, who not only furnished it but paid the rent as well. A letter to his father, himself burdened with unpaid bills, contains an irony that illustrates MacDonald’s lack of self-knowledge: “Pray to God to make me more humble and wise and earnest, and not self-seeking. Would you be so kind as to send us some meal now?” (*GMDW* 208). Although in many ways he differs from the poet Shelley, MacDonald nevertheless held an idealism resembling Shelley’s. Idealism blunted their perception of the feelings of others close to them. MacDonald’s judgment of Shelley strikes me as fitting for himself:

In private, he was beloved by all who knew him; a steady, generous, self-denying friend, not only to those who moved in his own circle,

but to all who were brought within the reach of any aid he could bestow. To the poor he was a true and laborious benefactor.” (*A Dish of Orts* 270)

At Arundel, an incident occurred that provides a pattern for MacDonald’s later life and for his fiction. In 1846, his cousin Helen Mackay, now Mrs. Alexander Powell, introduced him to Louisa Powell. These two women provide us with the two prototypes of MacDonald’s fictional females. MacDonald’s relationship with his cousin Helen remains mysterious because of Greville’s caution in his biography of his parents. George and Helen’s relationship is, perhaps, one of those “certain points” that several of Greville’s consultants thought “too intimate for publication” (*GMDW* 2). That George and Helen had been intimate since MacDonald’s college days is clear; it was Helen who comforted him in his loneliness and spiritual crises and who inspired him to write poetry. She was “a great beauty” and a favourite in the Powel home. Greville tells us that “Her charm of manner, sweetness of smile, the tenderness of voice in speech and song, her captivating eyes, bewitched these six sedate, if handsome and accomplished, young ladies: Louisa almost worshipped her” (*GMDW* 97-98). After her marriage to Alexander Powell, Louisa’s brother, in 1844, she still kept a “delightful and proprietary right in her cousin George of whom she expected great things for the world’s uplifting” (*GMDW* 98). Her own marriage was not happy.

Louisa Powell was the antithesis of her sister-in-law, quiet and plain. She did not have Helen’s fascination. Before her marriage, she wrote to MacDonald to say that she wished “I were as *bewitching*” as Helen (*GMDW* 136. Louisa’s italics). Her sense of inferiority and unfitness extended to both George and Helen, but, for the most part, her “freaks of misery” were caused by Helen’s “gifts and graces” (*GMDW* 124). The tensions Louisa felt were real. Helen showed an “unwillingness to relinquish the influence she once had” with MacDonald. In 1850, not long before Louisa and George were married, an incident occurred that illustrates the strained relations. “Certain pocket-books, full of boyhood’s scribblings” which MacDonald had given to Helen, he now wished Louisa to have. With a lack of tact that we shall see again, he asked Louisa to get the books from Helen. Louisa’s description of her interview with Helen is interesting. Helen’s reply to the request was, “Very well, Louisa, I will make up a little packet for him” (*GMDW* 140). Some of the poetry she burned, explaining that it “was for no eyes but her own.” “In later years,” MacDonald told of his cousin’s “love of power.”

In Helen and Louisa we have the two women that appear time after time in MacDonald’s novels, the one vivacious, domineering, and strongly sexual, and the other passive and maternal. The first type includes such figures as Euphra in *David Elginbrod*, Lady Lufa in *Home Again*, and the Alder Maiden in *Phantastes*. She is most strikingly portrayed as the vampire

Lilith, the destructive femme fatale. The second group includes mother figures such as North Wind, the maiden of the Beach Tree in *Phantastes*, and Lona, the daughter of Lilith. This feminine figure appears as a grandmother in *Phantastes* and in the “Princess” books, and as Eve, the mother of us all, in *Lilith*. She is the holy spirit manifested in the form of a dove; she is the *Ewig Weibliche*, the creative or redemptive female principle. Like Boehme’s Sophia, she is a passive figure who, when united with an active will, gives birth to new life.

In November 1850, MacDonald suffered a “furious hemorrhage from the lungs” (*GMDW* 144), and while convalescing at Newport, Isle of Wight and later at Niton, he wrote his first important book, the dramatic poem *Within and Without*. Like nearly all of his work, this poem contains biographical implications. The analysis that he sent to his publishers, Longman, Green and Company, reads like a history of his own development, disappointed in his medical and scientific ambitions, his spiritual awakening, and his failure of sympathy for his wife.

This poem is an attempt to represent the history of a man who, *apparently* disappointed in all his secondary aims and hopes, attains, partly through means of these disappointments, to the freedom of faith, and finds that in gaining this he has gained everything, in a higher form, too, than he had even anticipated . . . But the real cause for his disappointment is, that he had been seeking the knowledge of God by aspiration and abstraction alone, instead of seeking it in active life . . . From the different mental conditions of his wife and himself a gulf gradually opens between them. She cannot sympathize with his absorbing hunger for individual communication with the source of life; and he is too engrossed to minister his share of the beautiful to a nature that can only exist on the favour of the world . . . Then comes the final deliverance. He who had been seeking good for the sake of personal perfection to a degree that interfered entirely with what he owed to her who was nearest to him, comes to feel the baseness of even such lofty selfishness as this, and abjures it and himself with it. (*GMDW* 224-225)

MacDonald wrote his verse drama for his wife to assuage her doubts and fear. She “felt that his love for her fell short of what it might have been, had she been fitted as some women were” (*GMDW* 224). Of the three MSS. versions of *Within and Without* at the Brander Library in Huntly, the first is a working copy prepared especially for Louisa, meticulously transcribed by MacDonald, bound in blue leather with a gilt panel and tooling and gilt-stamped spins, and dated 1851-1854 (see Muriel Hutton). The work was published in May, 1855. It did not remove Louisa’s fears. While in Manchester in 1854, MacDonald was surrounded by “certain devoted women friends” who “did

what they could in looking after him” (*GMDW* 220). The solicitude of these women raised Louisa’s ire, and she was “a little naughtily satirical about their worship.”

Greville tells us that the “reception of the new writer was remarkable” (*GMDW* 223), but he cites only one brief passage from the long review in *The Scotsman*, and this he misquotes (*GMDW* 223). Most of the reviews I have seen agree with *The Scotsman* that the “chief feature of the poem is its intense spirituality”; this “noble poem” is a work for the “earnest spirits of the age” (*Scotsman*, July 21, 1855). “Earnest” and “noble” are words that appear again and again in reviews of MacDonald’s work. The noble emotions were admiration, hope, and love: “Love in the sense of pity for human beings suffering under misfortune, admiration for what is good and gracious in human nature, and, hence, hope for the human situation” (Houghton 265). Earnestness connotes a sincere attempt to answer the fundamental questions of life. It is “as an apocalypse of ‘that which passeth show,’ or that which is ‘within,’” that the *Brighton Herald* “Welcomes” *Within and Without*. The reviewer notes that MacDonald “is a great believer.” “Spiritual depths he sounds with rare descending faculty” (*Brighton Herald*, Aug. 11, 1855). The *Athenaeum* echoes this opinion: “Seldom have spiritual abysses been more thoroughly sounded” (July 7, 1855).

In these reviews and throughout his career, MacDonald is thought of as a poet, that is, one who keeps alive a love of the Ideal in an increasingly rationalistic and utilitarian society (see Houghton 152-153). The long preamble in the *Brighton Herald* review makes this clear:

Has the smoke of our factories and steam engines dimmed for us all the glory of the landscape, or is the music of the inner spheres all silenced by the grinding whirl of wheels, or by the louder whirl of “the battle bolt,” as from three-decker or battery it rushes on its deadly errand? Or do we know too much? Is science, as it measures the source of the wave, or the speed of the hurricane, or carries its line athwart the starry spaces, robbing us of our wonder, and despoiling us of the mystic spell of earth and sea and sky? As an excuse, perhaps, for our own superficiality, or our devotion to merely material interests, our repressions of the deeper feelings of our holy humanity, we may say the age is not a poetical one—as if any age or subject were in itself poetical save to the poet’s eye and soul. But, surely, ours is just the time in which, *a priori*, we should, in our reflective moods, anticipate a lofty style of minstrelsy; and it gives us unfeigned pleasure to write that in Mr. MacDonald’s poem of *Within and Without* we have an utterance, as it seems to us, wholly worthy of these momentous days.

The reviewer in *The Leader* laments the present state of poetry, and criticizes

MacDonald as a “Spasmodic,” but he admits that, “beneath all the absurdity there runs a current of genuine poetical feeling. Here and there exquisite thoughts, exquisitely expressed, flash brightly through the dense bathos of the general writing” (July 28, 1855). These are the main points that recur in many reviews of MacDonald’s work over the next forty years: it has artistic faults, but these pale beside the nobility, earnestness, and poetic quality of his writing, both poetry and fiction.

*Within and Without* contains a concept central to MacDonald’s thought. As the title suggests, he is dealing with psychological and religious dualisms that focus on the effect of external circumstances on the mental and spiritual state of the two main characters, Julian and Lilia. Julian experiences a tension between an in-going will which seeks to find God by abandoning worldly things, and an out-going will that attempts to find God in the external world. Neither approach to God is satisfactory since each denies the other. In his inner search for God, Julian neglects his wife. He is guilty of selfishness. For MacDonald, as for Jacob Boehme, “all sins arise out of selfishness” (Boehme, *Signature* 198). Self-absorption impedes progress; it is a refusal to acknowledge a relationship with others in a common origin. Julian comes to learn that he was “too given to meditation” and that

A deed of love  
Is stronger than a metaphysical truth;  
Smiles better teachers are than mightiest words.  
(*Poetical Works*, vol. 1, 112)

He had been “self-haunted, self-possessed,” and he learns through suffering and the example of his child, the power of Love. Joy comes in giving oneself to others. The good life is the active life. MacDonald would agree with Matthew Arnold that the “present age makes great claims upon us: we owe it service” (*Portable Matthew Arnold* 199). Participation in life is a duty of the poet. MacDonald notes that Shakespeare was a man of business as well as a poet, and he asserts that “one of the greatest advantages that can befall a poet [is] to be drawn out of his study, and still more out of the chamber of imagery in his own thoughts, to behold and speculate upon the embodiment of Divine thoughts and purposes in men and their affairs around him” (*A Dish of Orts* 105-106).

In May 1853, MacDonald resigned his pastorate under pressure from the deacons. Some of his parishioners objected to his “German” ideas, and he had also had the temerity to suggest that the heathen (and animals) would go to heaven. MacDonald found doctrine restrictive, and in a letter to his father he argues that “we are far too anxious to be definite and to have finished, well polished, sharp-edged *systems* . . . I am neither Arminian nor Calvinist. To no system would I subscribe” (*GMDW* 155. MacDonald’s italics.) In another letter, he asserts: “I have no love for *any* sect of Christians as such—

as little for Independents as any. One thing is good about them—which is continually being violated—that is the Independency. And independent I mean to be, in the real sense of the word” (*GMDW* 197. MacDonald’s italics). In an unpublished poem called, “My Faith,” MacDonald asks, “Which religion I profess?” His answer is “None of which you mention make.” To the question, “Wherefore so?,” he replies, “For Religion’s sake” (Houghton Library, Harvard University). MacDonald’s ideal is Jesus and his apostles who “uttered most unwelcome truths, setting at nought all the *respectabilities* of the time, and calling bad, bad, good, good, in the face of all religious perversions and false honourings” (*GMDW* 184. MacDonald’s italics.) In the words of Margaret Maison, MacDonald believes the true Christian life should be “spent, not in contemplation or argument, but in active and ceaseless labour for one’s fellow creatures, especially among the poor” (307).

Preaching was a “ceaseless labour” even after MacDonald left Arundel. Mark Rutherford (W. Hale White) considered MacDonald the “most exquisite preacher that ever entered a pulpit” (Rutherford, *Bookman* 118). A more complete appraisal of MacDonald as a preacher appears in the Rev. Phillips Brooks’s *Lectures on Preaching*:

Among the many sermons I have heard, I always remember one, for the wonderful way in which it was pervaded by this quality [sincerity]. It was a sermon by Mr. George MacDonald, the English author . . . and it had many of the good and bad characteristics of his interesting style. It had his brave and manly honesty, and his tendency to sentimentality. But over and through it all it had this quality: it was a message from God to these people by him. The man struggled with language as a child struggles with his imperfectly mastered tongue, that will not tell the errand as he received it, and has it in his mind. As I listened, I seemed to see how weak in contrast was the way in which other preachers had amused me and challenged my admiration for the working of their minds. Here was a gospel.

Here were real tidings. And you listened and forgot the preacher. (16)

Other reports of MacDonald’s preaching appear in the *Brighton Herald*, June 27, 1857, and in the Rev. Henry Martyn Dexter’s “George MacDonald in the Pulpit” (*Scribner’s Monthly*, 1871, 434-435). The general impression is that he was an impressive speaker. Grant Duff took the chair at one of MacDonald’s lectures on Wordsworth (in Banff, January 1868), and he notes in his diary: “He did not seem to me to show much critical power, though he has unquestionably a great deal of power of another kind” (*Notes from a Diary*: 1851-1872, vol. 2, 118).

MacDonald left the pastoral quiet of Arundel for the industrial dirt and noise of Manchester in the hope, he said, of finding “a few whom I can help” (*GMDW* 185). During the two and a half years in Manchester,

MacDonald met and became friends with A. J. Scott, then principal of Owens College. He also published *Within and Without*, and came under the patronage of Lady Byron, the poet's widow. These were years of poverty for the MacDonald family, and they barely managed to keep their house and servant at number 3 Camp Terrace. MacDonald received money from friends and he also earned small fees for lecturing. After the publication of his dramatic poem, Lady Byron was a constant help. She "was to MacDonald the protectress, the adviser, and once at least the extremely rigorous critic" (Mayne 391). She reacted to his idealism by suggesting "a course of the *Newgate Calendar*," and she pronounced the excess of emotion in his public readings of poetry "intolerable" (Mayne 392). But she often gave him money, and she sent the family to Algiers for the winter of 1856-1857. When she died in 1860, the MacDonalds received a legacy of 300 pounds.

MacDonald received money from his many friends all his life. The most prominent among these friends were the Cowper-Temples, who became Lord and Lady Mount-Temple in 1880. Lord Mount-Temple was the stepson of Lord Palmerston, and in 1869 Palmerston made over to him the famous country seat of Broadlands. Here during the 1870s and 1880s religious conferences were held. MacDonald, Ruskin, and D. G. Rossetti were a few of the notable participants. A series of letters, mainly addressed to Mrs. Cowper-Temple, reveal MacDonald's need for comfort, and perhaps his thoughtlessness. In the autumn of 1877, the MacDonald family left for Italy leaving George behind to arrange the transfer of ownership of the MacDonald's house in Hammersmith. At this time MacDonald was suffering from bronchitis and pleurisy. While confined to bed, he wrote to Mrs. Cowper-Temple on October 14:

How glad your letter, not to speak of the enclosed ones, made me. I had begun to be—not afraid exactly—but it seemed as if some evil had crept in between us. I had been so longing to hear from you—and longing to see you and no word would come.

Then he asks her to take him to Stanhope (where the Cowper-Temples lived at the time) for two or three days, adding,

It would be like a fairy story to have you to take care of me. I would pay you with such things out of the New Testament. It is much, much to ask, but what are you my sister for if I am going to be doubtful before you? . . . It is so grasping to take you from William for days.

But then he is as good as you, and I owe it to him not to be afraid of his grudging you. (Sadler 258-259)

Two days later, MacDonald writes to express apprehension about his earlier correspondence: "A fear has laid hold of me, dearest friends, that I have asked too much—not for your love—that is safe, but for your comfort" (Sadler 259). MacDonald was apt to overlook the feelings of those close



to him. Henry Crabb Robinson records an incident when MacDonald was indiscreet in expressing his opinion of Lord Byron, “imputing to him a diseased intellect, by which Lady Arabella was much hurt” (Diary entry, July 6, 1859).

In December 1877, MacDonald wrote from Villa Cattaneo, Nervi, to Mrs. Cowpeer-Temple to say that he found my wife a little troubled that I had showed you the letter in which she expressed her wish about Ted. She had written it only for me, as she could only write to me, and in my perfect faith in you had done such a thing as I had never done before and showed it. (Sadler 269)

More than once MacDonald showed his wife’s letters to Mrs. Cowper-Temple. He was undoubtedly kind and generous, a trusting friend, and also perhaps naïve. A. C. Benson feels that MacDonald was “perhaps too guileless and innocent” (*Rambles and Reflections* 148). He further believes that “with his magnificent physical appearance, his over-flowing kindness, his occasional sternness, he fell before a temptation to which other mystical men have yielded, of allowing himself to be considered a prophet” (147).

A prophet is what MacDonald had become by the 1870s. During this time, he was an important contributor to the Broadlands conferences. A small pamphlet with the long title, *Notes and Recollections of Some of the Addresses and Conversations at the Broadlands Conferences of August, 1887* (published anonymously), lists three talks and two prayers by MacDonald. His contribution amounts to two thirds of this slim pamphlet. His talks are on Faith, Hope and Life, and the Resurrection.

Mrs. Cowper-Temple was “an ardent spiritualist” (Derrick Leon 357). At Broadlands in 1875, MacDonald remarks on Ruskin’s interest in spirits: “There is a Mrs. A. [a society spiritualistic medium] here. I don’t take to her much, but Ruskin is very much interested . . . . She has seen and described, without ever having seen her, Rose whispering to Mr. Ruskin. He is convinced” (*GMDW* 472). MacDonald took a keen interest in the supernatural. In one of the meetings of the debating society at Highbury College, he introduced a discussion on ghosts, and when he lived in Hastings he attended the lectures of a Polish mesmerist, Zamoiski, the prototype for Von Funkelstein in *David Elginbrod*. MacDonald was also fascinated by the Highland belief in second sight, and he “reluctantly” admitted that he himself had no trace of this power (*GMDW* 318). His father, however, saw his son John Hill MacDonald two days after the latter’s burial in 1858; and John Hill himself, who wrote that he was “perpetually on the edge of vision” (*GMDW* 173), had a mystic experience while in Russia. In a letter incorporated into MacDonald’s novel, *What’s Mine’s Mine* (1886), John described a night spent hunting wolves. At one point, he was perched high in a tree shooting

at the wolves below when suddenly he had a feeling that there was a child beside him, and that this “little shining girl” was his own soul. “All the wrong things I had done, all the evil tendencies of my nature had taken shape and were besieging me in the person of the howling wolves below.” The child disappeared and “suddenly my soul was gone. I was left and lost.” His ammunition gave out, but he had to keep vigil until morning when the wolves left. Then he prayed for his soul and was comforted (“A Huntly Man . . .” 14-17; also *What’s Mine’s Mine* 103-105).

H. J. C. Grierson has suggested that MacDonald, possessed of a desire to be a mystic, lacked the mystic experience of a Blake or a Boehme. MacDonald was, he says, a “quester after a mystical solution rather than a mystic” (Grierson 12). Certainly, MacDonald had a “longing after visions and revelations” (*GMDW* 161), and this explains his interest in fantasy and romance. Not favoured with the mystic experience, MacDonald used his imagination to project himself into visions. He may not have been a mystic, but he was a visionary.

The first fruits of MacDonald’s visionary imagining is *Phantastes* (1858), a symbolic adventure meant to suggest meaning rather than state it, and by degrees lead the reader to deep truths. Fantasy, however, was not fashionable in the mid-Victorian period. Reviewing *Within and Without*, the anonymous writer in *The Leader* complained: “While the tendency of our prose literature is toward healthy reality, the tendency of our poetical literature is toward sickly idealism” (July 28, 1855, 727). The *Athenaeum* reviled the author of *Phantastes* for having “lost all hold of reality” (Nov. 6, 1858, 580); and the *Spectator*, in a generally favourable review, asserts that *Phantastes* “places us in the wildest regions of fairy and fancy, and though some of the persons or incidents appear to be allegorical, yet we can rarely satisfactorily interpret them, and sometimes not at all” (Dec. 4, 1858, 1286). MacDonald’s publisher, George Murray Smith, told him that “if you would but write novels, you would find all the publishers saving up to buy them of you! Nothing but fiction pays” (*GMDW* 318). MacDonald preferred poetry, his natural genius was for romance, but necessity forced him to “write for money, and prose pays best” (qtd in ‘Paladin’ 189).

MacDonald’s next book and his first novel appeared in 1863; this is *David Elginbrod*, published by Hurst and Blackett on the recommendation of Mrs. Oliphant. She explains the circumstances in a letter to Mr. Blackwood of *Blackwood’s Magazine*:

I am very glad you like *David Elginbrod*, and my anxiety to get the article admission I may explain by telling you that it was at my urgent recommendation (having read the MS. and made such humble suggestions towards its improvement as my knowledge of the literary susceptibility made possible) that Mr. Blackwood published it, and

that the author is not only a man of genius but a man burdened with ever so many children, and, what is perhaps worse, a troublesome conscientiousness. (*Autobiography* 163)

The article Mrs. Oliphant refers to was to be on *David Elginbrod*, but she did not have her way. Only one sentence in a long article on the modern novel was devoted to MacDonald's novel. It is called a "rare and chance work of genius, which is only in form a novel," and it is praised as "full of all manner of poetic instinct and tender wisdom" (*Blackwood's Magazine*, 94, 1863, 178).

*David Elginbrod* was, however, a success. *The Spectator*, in a long review, compared it with Bulwer Lytton's *Strange Story*, and concluded that Lytton "thinks of nothing but pseudo-philosophy, and makes the world of mind a lurid scene of blue lights and morbid passion" while MacDonald "lays his foundation in a striking delineation of hardy mental and spiritual health, and exhibits avowedly all these so-called spiritualistic phenomena as the perversions of disease" (Jan. 3, supplement 1863, 21-21). MacDonald's deviation from realism is, however, criticized in both *The Spectator* and the *Morning Post* (Jan. 10, 1863, 7). Subsequently, MacDonald's genius for romance moves underground to re-emerge in stories for children.

Wolff calls the years from 1858 to 1865 "sterile" suggesting that the death of MacDonald's father in August, 1858, "created a mixture of sorrow and guilt and inferiority so strong as to make writing difficult" (112). The facts, I think, tell a different story. These were busy years for MacDonald: besides his many other activities, he published stories, poems, and criticism in many of the leading journals. In 1860, he published in the first two volumes of the *Cornhill* (edited by Thackeray) a short story, "The Portent," which he expanded and published in book form in 1864. "My Uncle Peter" appeared in *The Queen* on December 21, 1861. His poems appeared in *MacMillan's Magazine*, *Good Words*, and the *Illustrated London News*. He also wrote studies of Shakespeare in 1863 and 1864, and he contributed an article on Shelley to the eighth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1860 (volume 20).

MacDonald's collaboration with Arthur Hughes, the Pre-Raphaelite painter, also began during these years. On July 9, 1862, Lewis Carroll recorded a meeting with MacDonald. They met just outside MacDonald's house, and Carroll "walked a mile or so with him, on the way to a publisher with the MS. of his fairy tale *The Light Princess* in which he showed me some exquisite drawings by Hughes" (qtd in Green, *Teller of Tales* 37; see also Carroll's *Diaries*, vol. 1, 184). MacDonald's collaboration with Hughes began as early as 1861; the issue of *The Queen* that contains "My Uncle Peter," also contains two poems (unpublished elsewhere), "Born on Christmas-Eve" and "Died on Christmas Eve" which are accompanied by an

Arthur Hughes illustration. Hughes remained a life-long friend, and as late as 1905 he was still illustrating MacDonald's fantasies.

In these same years, MacDonald moved from Hastings to Tudor Lodge, Albert Street, Regent's Park, and he accepted a professorship at a college for women, Bedford College. In his diary entry for July 6, 1859, Henry Crabbe Robinson records that he

finished a letter to MacDonald, which I forgot to post yesterday, intimating that the prize is a mean one—in fact, not worth his acceptance. I did not say to him expressly that the chair would not pay the difference of expense in living between London and Hastings. In the course of the day I learned that a letter of mine to Mrs. Reid was read to a council meeting, and that there is no doubt the offer will be made. I also in the evening spoke on this subject with Lady Byron, who thinks as we all do about him. (*On Books and Their Writers* 786-787)

MacDonald accepted the post at Bedford College in 1859 and held it until 1867 when he and others resigned in protest against outside examiners.

In 1863, the MacDonald family moved to 12 Earls Terrace, Kensington, a house later occupied by Walter Pater. In this same year, MacDonald met John Ruskin. The two men soon became close friends. Ruskin helped MacDonald in every way possible. "Not only did he criticize his works for him: but he did everything in his power to alleviate his financial embarrassments" (Leon 355). He encouraged MacDonald to "trust in me practically—whether you do theologically or not" (Leon 355). "There is no doubt," Derrick Leon writes, "that Ruskin responded to the charm of the MacDonald family even at those periods when he was suffering most deeply" (Leon 355). Leon refers to the tragic romance between Ruskin and Rose la Touche. The MacDonald house in Hammersmith (they moved to Upper Mall in 1867) was a meeting place for the two lovers. Ruskin understood that MacDonald was a sincere Christian, but blind to his own and humanity's limitations. In an undated letter to MacDonald, Ruskin writes:

I suppose it is impossible for you dear good people who think it your duty to believe whatever you like—and who expect always to get whatever is good for you, to enter into the minds of us poor wicked people. (qtd in *GMDW* 334)

MacDonald provides us with a moving encomium of his friend in a sonnet, "To John Ruskin," published posthumously in 1920 (Whitehouse 834). This poem is interesting for the sensitivity with which MacDonald understands Ruskin's torments. The MS. of the sonnet is undated (Houghton Library, Harvard University), but it undoubtedly belongs to the period after 1872 when all hope for Ruskin and Rose had vanished:

O friend, since I have seen this fair day,

The day is fairer; for its golden show.  
 Long ere the evening, rosy all doth grow;  
 The face hath changed it—tho it be not gay.  
 Not as a bridegroom's clad in radiant play,  
 But calm and strong, serene, divinely slow,  
 With sorrowing smiles that at my bosom go:  
 Thy soul looks forth crowned for a kingly sway:  
 Some men would hold thy sun was in the west,  
 And his with rosy clouds its dying head,  
 Flushed with the bloody thy trampled heart hath shed.  
 Weary with waiting and not being blest:  
 I say 'tis morn that dawneth in thy breast  
 Tho dark-plumed Night would brood the glory dead.

In his novel, *Wilfrid Cumberland* (1872), MacDonald examines Ruskin's mental dilemma, and we can see how close his friendship with Ruskin was: "We renewed an affection resembling from afar that of Shakespeare for his nameless friend; we anticipated that informing *In Memoriam*" (169). When Rose la Touche died in 1875, the two men drifted apart for some years. They never met again, but they renewed friendly correspondence in the 1880s (see Leon 570).

Despite a long list of ailments—asthma, lumbago, toothache, eczema, and the ever-recurring lung infection—MacDonald and his family were fortunate. In 1865, MacDonald took a long holiday in Switzerland where he experienced the mountain epiphany familiar with Ruskin and others. He recorded his experience in the short story, "A Journey Re-journeyed," published in *Argosy*, December 1865 and January 1866. Here he writes of the Alps: "They seized me utterly. Though not quite like what I had expected, they were much beyond it. Their vastness, more than their hoped for height, took possession of me." The Alps are "the stair up to the throne of God" (*Argosy*, 1, 1865, 57, 59). MacDonald returns to the grandeur of the Alps in the novels, *Robert Falconer* (1868) and *Wilfrid Cumberland* (1872). But his most interesting mountain passage occurs in the first chapter of *The Princess and Curdie*, first published serially in *Good Things* from January to June 1877. The beginning of this fantasy acknowledges the change in attitude towards mountains: "In old times, without knowing so much of their strangeness and awfulness as we do, people were yet more afraid of mountains. But then somehow they had not come to see how beautiful they are as well as awful, and they hated them—and what people hate they must fear" (9). Prior to the late seventeenth century, mountains were commonly considered Nature's blemishes, warts, wrinkles, or pimples, and people looked upon them in fear. Mountains were signs of disorder, of the earth's corruption. But notions of creation changed and science opened up vast new

worlds; mountains became emblems of the divine, monuments of God's glory (see Nicolson).

In 1867, MacDonald published a novel, *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*; a volume of poetry, *The Disciple and other Poems*; a volume of sermons, *Unspoken Sermons*; and a collection of children's stories, *Dealings With the Fairies*. This last established his reputation as a writer for children. H. A. Page, writing in the *Contemporary Review* in 1869, claimed that MacDonald, "more than any other in our country, has raised child-literature to the level of high art. He has a pure, graceful phantasy. There is in his book a soft, gradual dawning of beauty and delight, like the clear light of a northern morning, as bracing as it is clear, he lifts and lightens and inspires" (Page 23). Many believe, with Jane Douglass, that "it is as a writer for children that he will be most honoured and loved" (327).

In the same year that *Dealings With the Fairies* appeared, the MacDonalds moved to The Retreat, Upper Mall, Hammersmith, and their eleventh and last child was born. The Retreat, which is also known by the name William Morris gave it—Kelmescott House—is a magnificent place, five stories high with a back garden of huge proportions. While the MacDonalds resided here, the house was the center of social activity and social work; guests ranged from Tennyson, Octavia Hill, the Russell Gurneys, to a penniless Oxford graduate "who came begging in rags and remained with us many weeks" and a drunkard "adopted for reformation" (*GMDW* 384). Both in the house and in the garden, the family acted in plays for the entertainment of the guests, and in 1877 they first performed *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Louisa MacDonald was in charge of the theatricals, and she wrote several of the plays (*Chamber Dramas for Children*, 1870). Other plays performed included an adaptation of Dickens's *Haunted Man*, one based on Zola's *L'Assommoir* and Corneille's *Polyeucte*. The whole family took part. Lewis Carroll describes a Saturday visit to the MacDonalds to see "one of Mrs. MacDonald's dramas, *Snowdrop*." It was, he writes, "acted by the children, and two or three friends. The stage was out in the garden, with curtains next the audience (100 poor people from Marylebone—Ruskin's tenants; and a few friends), but no back-ground, and no means of getting the actors unseen to the stage, which rather spoiled the effect. However, it was capitally done—Lily being the best of all: she has a real genius for acting" (*Diaries*, vol. 2, 300). The MacDonalds often provided entertainment for the poor: "There was a midday dinner before and a tea after the play, the day ending with games and country dancing" (*GMDW* 381). At one of these parties, in 1868, Ruskin, with Octavia Hill as his partner, led off the final Sir Roger de Coverly.

The atmosphere in MacDonald's homes—Tudor Lodge, Earls Terrace, The Retreat, and Casa Corragio in Italy—appealed to all. In 1871, R. B. Litchfield wrote to his fiancé to tell her that he was feeling "a kind of

craving for some peaceful atmosphere where I could be happy,” and so he “went and saw the MacDonalds.” He concludes that “sweetness and light (no cant) dwell in that house” (qtd in Leon 353). Mrs. La Touche wrote Louisa to say that she thought of the MacDonald family “as a harmony, a tuneful circle, to which anything might come but discord.” She added: “I don’t see anything like it anywhere else” (qtd in Leon 354). Life at the Retreat, in the words of Mrs. Cobden-Sanderson, was “full of excitement and interest. Meals were erratic; but no one complained, for self-forgetfulness was the rule of the house. The belief in Divine Guidance carried us over the difficulties” (*GMDW* 387-388). William Morris received a different account of the MacDonald household from the Miss Cobdens (see *Letters* 113), but one thing is certain: the Retreat served as a place of refuge for any and all who were tired, frustrated, poor, or lonely, and the acceptance of all types of people, at least once, shocked even Ruskin (*GMDW* 381). The MacDonald home was the center of charity and hospitality, “the refuge of all that were in honest distress, the salvation of all in themselves such as could be helped, and a covert for the night to all the houseless, of whatever sort” (*Sir Gibbie* 431).

In 1869, MacDonald received the degree of LL.D. from his old university, King’s College, Aberdeen. A year later, he became editor of *Good Words for the Young*, a post he relinquished in 1872, the year of his American lecture tour. *Good Words for the Young* was eulogized by Ernest Rhys: “But what enchantment lay hidden in its pages! There were two long stories in it, one called *At the Back of the North Wind*; the other, *Ranald Bannerman’s Boyhood*, had a Scottish countryside for its scene, and just that background of farm life and hill and stream that I relished” (*Wales England Wed* 23). As well as these two stories, the magazine serialized *The Princess and the Goblin* between 1870 and 1871.

Before leaving for America, the MacDonalds took a second house in Hastings (Halloway House), and the study was decorated to resemble the one at the Retreat with its dark blue ceiling, scattered stars and silver crescent moon. As the names of their houses indicate, this was a period of ease and happiness for the family. MacDonald, however, was a stern father. His children’s stories give every indication that he understood children and could sympathize with their fears and desires. In practice, he evidenced some misunderstanding of his own children. Greville says that his father “did not altogether understand children,” and “corporeal punishment, sometimes severe, was inevitable.” The result was that “it made an over sensitive child craving for love, so truly afraid of his father that more than once I lied to him.” Greville received punishment for failing to grasp intuitively the principles of Latin grammar and Euclid (*Reminiscences* 31). His father bought a new watch worth ten pounds, but Greville, his hair long and shaggy, was “the shabbiest-drest boy in the school” (*Reminiscences* 30-32).

In September 1872, MacDonald, with his wife and eldest son, set sail for Boston, Massachusetts. Despite constant ill health, MacDonald was a success on this tour; in New York he received an offer of a pastorate “at a stipend of \$20,000 per annum” (*GMDW* 459). J. T. Fields and his wife met the MacDonalds at Boston, and another life-long friendship began. As well as being a trusted friend, Fields seems to have been MacDonald’s American financial agent. MacDonald also made friends with Richard Watson Gilder, poet and editor of *Scribner’s Magazine*. In 1886, Gilder recalled MacDonald’s visit: “Once, when Dr. MacDonald was staying at my house, he spent some time in reading, with great delight, one of Mark Twain’s books, before preaching one of the most profound, moving and spiritual sermons to which I ever listened” (*Letters* 399). Among other new acquaintances were Longfellow, Emerson, Whittier, Samuel Clemens, and Bret Harte. In May 1873, after a gala farewell dinner, the MacDonalds returned to the Retreat.

They settled here until MacDonald became ill in 1874. The next spring the family took the old farmhouse, Great Tanglely Manor, near Guildford, and at the end of May MacDonald wrote to Ruskin: “Now we are all but Psyches half awake, who see the universe in great measure only by reflection from the dull coffin-lid over us. But I hope, I hope, I hope infinitely” (*Reminiscences* 122). The note of determined and willed faith signals the beginning of a period of spiritual difficulty that produced sadness, but never destroyed hope. Earlier in the year, MacDonald’s daughter Mary Josephine was afflicted with tuberculosis, the disease that MacDonald later named “the family attendant” (*GMDW* 470). The family left London and took a house in Bournemouth; they named this house Corage. The name of this and MacDonald’s next and final home, Casa Corragio, indicate the spiritual struggle and unfaltering faith of MacDonald’s final years. MacDonald himself was ill at this time, and the family was hard-pressed financially. To offset their financial difficulties, the family began giving public theatrical performances, the most famous of which was their production of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. At least one famous figure was “a good deal interested” in this production, with MacDonald as Greatheart and his eldest daughter, Lily, as Christiana. W. B. Yeats, in his Preface to *Letters to the New Island*, recalls seeing the production at the Bedford Park Clubhouse in West London, and he describes the simple scenery, “hangings of rough calico embroidered in crewel work.” Some “like method,” Yeats thought, “might keep the scenery from realism” (ix-x).

MacDonald’s daughter, Winifred, gives a description of the production in her Preface to the play-script. She tells us that the most important point in performing these scenes is to set with simplicity and sincerity and without attempts at theatrical effect. Except in the second scene, where a wicket-gate and paling are



needed, no scenery was used: the stage was hung with curtains of appropriate colour and design to each scene.

The men and women were dressed in the costumes of Bunyan's period. The allegorical and celestial persons wore simple Greek garments. Greatheart appeared in shining armour with a large red cross on the front of his white tabard.

The music at the beginning and between the scenes was from Handel's *Messiah* and other classical works: only a piano was used. In most of the scenes there was a good deal of movement . . . .

*(Dramatic Illustrations)*

"Paladin" claims that the production was "an extraordinary compound of talent and grotesqueness. Much of the acting was good. But the attempt to represent profound religious truths through the medium of the drama is itself incongruous and grotesque, and belongs to the infancy of human thought." This may be nothing more than Victorian prejudice against the theatre, but "Paladin" goes on to give a noteworthy reaction to one aspect of the play: "I should say that Dr. MacDonald is a little Scotch in his inability to see where literalness becomes equivalent to farce. Thus a general laugh was raised by the exhibition of the jaw-bone of the ass with which Samson slew his thousands—and this at what was meant to be a solemn stage of the drama." The "mingled laughter and applause" formed "an unnatural and jarring accompaniment" (*Glances and Great and Little Men* 189-191).

Augustus Hare offers a different impression. To him, "Christiana (the eldest daughter) was the only one who acted well. Nevertheless, the whole effect was touching,—the audience cried most sympathetically as Christiana embraced her children to go over the great river" (*In My Solitary Life* 108-109). And Octavia Hill, who herself more than once helped in the production, thought it "most beautiful" and most appealing to the working men (E. S. Maurice 482-483). To a young viewer, Laura Ragg, who saw the play when she was sixteen, the "team seemed . . . wholly inadequate to a very difficult task, and they were not assisted by any effects of scenery or lighting. The home-painted black cloth . . . suggested neither *Vanity Fair* nor the final passage of the River, and I felt that Bunyan's great allegory had been travestied rather than popularized" (60). It is now impossible to judge the play, but the night Yeats saw the MacDonald family in action is enough to vindicate the troupe. Whatever its value as drama, the production did provide valuable financial support for the family's move to Italy.

In 1877 the family moved to Italy and set up house at Palazzo Cattaneo in Nervi. Here in April 1977, Mary Josephine died. Mary's illness and death were a blow to MacDonald. Later in the year the family moved again, this time to Porto Fino, and here in 1879, MacDonald's son, Maurice, died. Once more the family was shaken by grief. MacDonald wrote to a

friend: “Life looks short to me now,” but he corrected himself—“or should I say—Life is drawing very near” (*GMDW* 492), and in 1880 he published his *Book of Strife in the form of the Diary of an Old Soul*, a record of his doubts and fears. The death of both a son and daughter in less than a year forced MacDonald to face the reality of death: “How real death makes things look! And how we learn to cleave to the one shining fact in the midst of the darkness of this world’s trouble, that Jesus *did* rise radiant! (Sadler, *An Expression* 293). The years from 1880 to 1891 saw the deaths of MacDonald’s daughter Grace (1884), his grand daughter Octavia (1891), his daughter-in-law (1890), and his most beloved child, Lilia (1891).

In 1880, the MacDonalds moved into a huge house in Bordighera—Casa Corragio, which was the gift of a number of friends, and here MacDonald spent most of his final twenty-five years. The coming of the MacDonald family to Bordighera “marked a real epoch” (Brookfield 401) in the life of that town, and Casa Corragio became the center of social activity. In 1883, Lady Mount-Temple visited the house, and she reported that the place was “the very heart of Bordighera, the rich core of it, always raying out to all around, and gathering them to itself” (*Memorials of William Cowper-Temple* 84). The house must have been magnificent: the walls of the great living room, which measured fifty-two feet by twenty-six by thirteen, and which was reached by a “palatial staircase,” were adorned by “three fine likenesses of MacDonald himself” (Brookfield 402). Emilia Gurney remembers her visit to Casa Corragio in 1889, recalling “the room hung round with Genoese scarves,—a semi-grand piano, and a frieze of photographs of Turner’s landscapes, a delightful fire burning on the hearth, a small table spread for our evening meal, and soon the dear patriarch, now looking so venerable, came in with outstretched arms” (*Letters of Emilia Gurney* 330).

On Sunday and Wednesday evenings, the great house was open to any who wished to attend for hymn singing, a sermon, or talks on MacDonald’s favourite literature. “The guests were received,” writes Laura Ragg, “by Irene and her brother and sister, and when all the young people had assembled and a few older ones were seated round the big fire, George MacDonald and his wife entered, and everyone rose and clapped as though they had been royalties” (61). One visitor described MacDonald as dressed in a “black velvet coat and skull cap, and red tie and socks of the same colour” and a cloak with red lining (Brookfield 402). The entire family, another visitor remarked, “were all rather artistically got up” (Unpublished Journal - Anne Harris). Both at the Wednesday poetry reading and the Sunday evening services the pattern was the same. The guests and family would be in their places before “that noble grand form, with his bowed head” would enter “from an unexpected side-door” (Brookfield 402).

The family was, as usual, active in helping the poor. They gave a concert for the completion of a Catholic church, and Christmas festivities for the less fortunate among the Bordighera residents were a yearly event. A destitute mother and her two children joined the household. The two children were “fed, clothed, and educated in and by the MacDonald household”:

They called their benefactors *Padre and Madre*. They sat at meals with them except on occasions when they waited on overcrowded table; they sometimes joined in the charades which formed a weekly evening amusement. But they also ran errands and helped to make beds and wash up after tea-parties—services which to-day would be performed as a matter of course by the younger members of a large household, but which were then regarded as menial; and as menial Joan and Honey undoubtedly viewed and resented them.

(Ragg 61)

In his novel, *The Seaboard Parish* (1868), MacDonald had argued that it was unfair to bring up a foundling “just as our own.” She would be happier, the narrator argues, “If we put her in a way of life that would be recognizant of whence she came” (88).

On February 23, 1887, an earthquake shook Bordighera. MacDonald was working on his novel *Home Again*, and in Chapter 30 he adds this footnote:

It may interest some of my readers to be told that I had got thus far in preparation for this volume, when I took a book from the floor, shaken with hundreds beside from my shelves by an earthquake the same morning, and opening it—it was a life of Lavatar which I had not known I possessed—found these words, written by him on a card, for a friend to read after his death:—“Act according to thy faith in Christ, and thy faith will soon become sight.” (285-286)

Through the worst tremors MacDonald remained in his study and wrote. On the morning of the second day, Louisa was sitting by the organ in the English Church when another fierce tremor occurred. Undaunted, she “pulled out all her stops and played the Hallelujah Chorus” (*GMDW* 515). The family was prodigious in its aid to victims of the earthquake “visitors and natives alike” (*GMDW* 514).

Amid all the philanthropy, we hear a disturbing note. Bernard Grenfell, the archaeologist, visited Bordighera in 1886-1887, and he reported that “the society is very rotten, no one seems to have anything better to do than to talk scandal of the neighbours and especially about the MacDonalds. This may seem strange, but the fact is that the MacDonalds were in many ways extremely unpopular. It is true that all Bordighera used to attend their Wednesday ‘At Homes’ when George MacDonald used to read the *Excursion* and similar poems . . . but the MacDonalds were otherwise barred by the

other people. George MacDonald himself was liked. He is very patriarchal both in his appearance and his mind, one cannot but admire his simplicity” (Grenfell 246-247).

However this may be, MacDonald’s long cherished dream became an actuality: he was provided with a place of his own where he could gather people together and “do his work without any reference to others” who opposed his teaching (*GMDW* 204). He was the patriarch of Bordighera; he was, in Augustus Hare’s words, “the king of the place” who “writes constantly and never leaves the house, except to see a neighbour in need of help or comfort” (244). With this new home at Bordighera, “his hope was like some chief of a clan, he might keep his children near him, whatever their work” (*Reminiscences* 178). MacDonald urged his son Greville to take up medical practice in Bordighera. In the case of his eldest child, Lilia, the demands of home were paramount. Lilia Scott MacDonald was a gifted actress who “had longed to go on the stage, and more than one noted actor urged it” (*Reminiscences* 308). But because the theatre smacked of disrepute, her parents “would not consent to their daughter becoming an actress” (*GMDW* 385). Nevertheless, Lilia took a prominent part in the family productions, playing such roles as Lady Macbeth, Christiana, and the Beauty in *The Beauty and the Beast*. Her brother, Greville, believed that the family productions gave “Lilia but little scope,” and he cautiously adds: “her life was devoted—I dare not say wasted—to the interminable demands of home” (*Reminiscences* 309). Lilia broke her engagement rather than discontinue acting in public life with her family. She remained faithful to her family until in 1891, while nursing a friend who had tuberculosis, she contacted the disease and died in her father’s arms on November 22 of that year.

The loss of Lilia was tremendous, and it initiated a period of depression and spiritual unrest that culminated in the silence of MacDonald’s last years. After Lilia’s funeral, MacDonald “could hardly leave the grave: he came back twice after all the others had left, and it was with difficulty that he was at last led away” (*GMDW* 526). A visitor to Casa Corragio in the 1890s came to the conclusion that MacDonald felt he “was himself the source of the great sorrow of his middle-age—the death from tuberculosis of his beautiful, gifted, and much-loved eldest daughter” (Ragg 60).

In the same year that Lilia died, MacDonald published the novel, *There and Back*, a book that indicates his mental and spiritual unrest. The young protagonist, Richard Lestrangle, confronted by the suffering and cruelty of life, cannot bring himself to believe in God, and a large proportion of the novel is given over to speculation on the nature of God and the reason for the cruelty and absurdity of life. In his desolation, Richard cries out:

If thou art anywhere, speak to me, and let me hear thee. If thou art God, if thou livest, and carest that I suffer, and wouldst help me if

thou couldst, then I will live, and bear, and wait; only let me know that thou art, and art good, and not cruel. If I had but a friend that would stand by me, and talk to me a little, and help me! I have no one, no one, God, to speak to! And if thou wilt not hear, then there is nothing! Oh, be! Be! God, I pray thee exist. (272)

To Richard, there was “schism everywhere; no harmony, no right, no concord, no peace!” (262). Even more revealing is the notion of self-awareness in this novel. The narrator confesses that “when a man finds he is not what he thought, that he has been talking fine things, and but imagining he belonged to their world, he is in the way to discover that he is not up to his duty, in the smallest thing” (296). Later, Simon Armour, the noble blacksmith, says that “when a man first gets a peep inside himself, he sees things he didn’t look to see—and they stagger him a bit” (342).

In his fiction, MacDonald fashioned a myth of the eternal quest for spiritual perfection and communion with God, the Father who is immanent in all things. He tried to show “what we might be, may be, must be, shall be—and something of the struggle to gain it” (Sadler, *Expression* 288). He drew the basis of that myth from his own life. From his reading of Romantic literature, he found both the basis of his literary theory, and the images and symbols for his own myth. His life was an attempt to live this myth, MacDonald himself playing a tripartite role: as an individual he is the pilgrim-child climbing the hill to find the Father; as husband and father of eleven children, he is the representative of the divine Father watching over his flock; and as the poet-seer he is gifted with true vision and the spirit of communication. He seeks purification of the soul through self-denial. Only “by choosing God for the father he is, and doing his will—yielding ourselves true sons to the absolute Father” can we reach the true meaning of life (*Unspoken Sermons*, Third Series 14). The outward search for God was a simple matter: “I believe that every fact in nature is a revelation of God” (61). What was most difficult was to live the perfect life as exemplified in the life of Jesus; that is, to “give up our life” (20). With characteristic perception, Ruskin, commenting on MacDonald’s writing, noted that “rarely do we sense that the spiritual goal of realization of the ‘true self’ is reached, or that the poet’s statements completely satisfy his longing” (Sadler Ph.D. 239). In the 1890s, MacDonald was plagued with “the insomnia attendant upon mental distress” (*Reminiscences* 331) that was, in turn, aggravated by excema, lumbago, headache, asthma, bronchitis, and backache.

MacDonald spent the years between 1890 and 1895 working on his romance, *Lilith*, and these were the years of his greatest sorrow. He begins to tire of life: “I am so tired of everything; yet with oh! So much to learn; and trouble the only way” (*Reminiscences* 320). In 1894, he writes: “I have been and still am going through a time of trial” and he fears that he may not write

again (*Reminiscences* 321). In this same year, he wrote a long letter to his friend, J. S. Blackie, in which he places his final hope in the coming death: “Next month I shall be 70, and I am humbler a good deal than when I was 20. To be rid of self is to have the heart bare to God and to the neighbour . . . I see in my mind’s eye, the little children clambering up to sit on the throne with Jesus” (Sadler 362-363). Faith and hope always triumphed.

In 1897, MacDonald published his last novel, *Salted With Fire*, and Augustus Max praised MacDonald in the New York *Bookman* for his handling of “sexual realism” (161). A year later, MacDonald published his last work in the Christmas number of the *Sketch*. This is the short story, “Far Above Rubies.” W. Robertson-Nicoll informs us that MacDonald “did at one time think of writing a few autobiographical sketches” (*Bookman*, 1900, 116), and I have no doubt that this story is one of them. Its relation to MacDonald’s early life is transparent; it takes no leap of imagination to see the fact behind the fiction. MacDonald makes a retrospective assessment of his youthful idealism; his tendency to ignore the practical realities of life in the ardour of his search for God. He writes of his hero:

Hector Macintosh was a young man of about five and twenty, who with the proclivities of the Celt, inherited also some of the consequent disabilities, as well as some that were accidental. Among the rest was a strong tendency to regard only the ideal, and turn away from any authority derived from an inferior source. His chief delight lay in the attempt to embody, in what seemed to him the natural form of verse, the thoughts in him constantly moving at least in the direction of the ideal . . . (23)

And when MacDonald tells us that his hero “was intimate with none” although his “mind would dwell much upon love and friendship in the imaginary abstract” we are reminded of the lonely student at King’s College. Indeed, we learn that Hector was educated at a northern Scottish university. Later he falls in love, gets married, and writes a dramatic poem (*Within and Without?*). His second volume (MacDonald’s *Poems*, published in 1857), “did not attract the same amount of attention as the former, and the result gave no encouragement to the publisher to make a third venture. One reason possibly was that the subjects of most of the poems, even the gayest of them, were serious, and another may have been that the common tribe of reviewers, searching like other parasites, discovered in them material for ridicule” (33). The reviewers, he continues, “seeming to have forgotten their first favourable reception of him, now began to find nothing but faults in his work” (33).

I note that *The Spectator* had written of MacDonald’s second book: “Of that ethereal spirit which is one of the symptoms of poetry there is little trace, or of what is understood by poetical spirit. There is consequently a failure of effect compared with the apparent power of the writer. This may

in part arise from ill-chosen subjects” (July 11, 1857, 736). Even the *British Quarterly Review*, which often praised MacDonald, said of this volume: “To impersonate and adorn abstraction is very easy, and for this reason to be shunned with suspicion.” “[MacDonald] knows what it is to find the body a burden, and flesh a cross. Perhaps, to the largest, richest order of poetry, a healthy body is as necessary as a gifted mind” (519-520).

MacDonald says his hero now suffered poverty, and found difficulty selling his verse. He is advised to change his subject and his style of writing. He is made redundant from his job in a bank (Arundel?). His wife suggests that he write prose narrative. His interest is excited by “certain symbolical possibilities” in prose, and he writes a fantasy (*Phantastes?*). It attracts little attention, “lacking in human interest.” It contains “too much of the Celtic tendency to the mystical and allegorical as distinguished from the factual and storial” (34). In other words, it does not meet the standards of realism. He now follows a more conventional path with a novel of courtship (*David Elginbrod?*). On the point of starvation, the family is saved by a legacy of five hundred pounds let them by a little old lady (Lady Byron?). Hector’s joy is so great, he writes a fairy tale (*The Light Princess?*). And finally he takes a position as lecturer “to ladies upon English Poetry” (Bedford College?). The pattern is complete, and follows MacDonald’s life to the early 1860s when a period of happiness, industry, and prosperity began.

George MacDonald inhabited his own myth; his life was a romance complete with the dragons of doubt and self. The end, or the beginning, came on September 18, 1905, when MacDonald died at Ashstead, Surrey.

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