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## George MacDonald and the Cambridge Apostles: Literature, Theology, the Arts, and Social Reform in Victorian England

Stephen Prickett

When I first read Benjamin Disraeli's 1844 novel *Coningsby*—sometimes described as the first political novel in English—I was intrigued by the mention of a Cambridge tutor who, after teaching hours, initiated his pupils into what seemed to be dark and arcane secret knowledge—something by implication between black magic and a terrorist cell. It was many years later that I realized that this was one of the earliest references to the Cambridge Conversazione Society that quickly became known as “The Apostles”—so called, because the membership was limited to twelve at any one time. Much more of a surprise to me was the news that, so far from practicing dark political arts, this society was founded in 1820 to develop an understanding of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's social and religious thought.

Coleridge is known to most of us primarily as a poet—author of such well-known poems as *The Ancient Mariner* or “Frost at Midnight”—and today his later career as a political and social thinker is largely overlooked, yet in his lifetime this was the other way round: he was much better known for his controversial social and theological ideas—and, much more sinister, as a dissolute drug-addict. Perhaps more remarkable, the foundation of the Apostles pre-dates much of Coleridge's best-known work in this area. *Church and State*, for instance, probably his most detailed piece of political ideology, belongs to the late 1820s, and was aimed primarily at attacking the proposal for Catholic Emancipation. While this failed to stop the new reform—which became law in 1829—it had an unexpected and significant influence on later social policy. What seems to have been the main influence on the 1820 gathering seems to have been Coleridge's two Lay Sermons, *The Statesman's Manual*—the first subtitled “*The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight*” and the second, “*“Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters”: A Lay Sermon addressed to the Higher and Middle Classes on the existing Distresses and Discontents.*”

Anyone who reads of the maneuvering and chicanery of contemporary politics of the day—quite unlike our own, of course—will be

even more astonished that these two deeply idealistic writings should have had any practical influence on real life. Ironically, it was probably Disraeli himself, who was never the graduate of any university, but became one of the most popular novelists of the 1840s, who seems to have made more use of Coleridge in his “one nation” Toryism than any aspiring Liberal politician. Indeed, if we are to judge by practical results, Disraeli was arguably the greatest and most influential Coleridgean of all time. It was Richard Cross, Disraeli’s first Home Secretary, who began the slow process of slum clearance and welfare programs for those left behind by industrialization, and provided a continuing counter-weight to the *laissez-faire* individualism of the Gladstonian liberals. If Disraeli did not invent the Apostles, he was to give them a totally unexpected glamour—coupled, of course, with a quite undeserved suggestion of secret power, then, of course, absurd, but with its later accretion of the status of a secret society, and the revelation of the Cambridge spy ring of former members of Trinity Hall in Cold War days, a curiously prophetic attribution.

Though MacDonald, a graduate of Aberdeen University, and from a superficially very different tradition, was obviously never an Apostle, it is significant how close his interests were to this young and idealistic group in other ways. The first link is his debt to Coleridge. This may come as something of a surprise from a quick glance at MacDonald’s literary essays. His essay on “The Imagination,” for instance, has glowing references to Bacon, Carlyle, Keats, Milton, Shakespeare, Shelley, Spenser, Tennyson, and Wordsworth—yet in this panorama of Romantic taste, Coleridge’s name is strangely absent. But this is less a matter of ignoring him than of acknowledging an omnipresence. To anyone familiar with chapter XIII of Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, an examination of the *structure* of MacDonald’s essay on “The Imagination” immediately reveals some very familiar themes. The whole discussion is centred around the idea of a primary and secondary imaginations, and turns on a discussion of how far human imagination reflects the infinitely greater divine imagination. As William Raeper puts it, for MacDonald “Wordsworth was the seer,” and “Coleridge was the sage”—combining philosophy, poetry and theology, drawing on the ancient classical tradition stemming from Plato and Plotinus.<sup>1</sup> Here is what MacDonald has to say in *England’s Antiphon*, his 1868 anthology of English religious poetry: “Coleridge had much to do with the opening of Wordsworth’s eyes to such visions; as, indeed, more than any other man of our times, he has opened the eyes of the English people to see wonderful

things.” This was certainly the case with Disraeli’s fictional Cambridge tutor, who was almost certainly based on Julius Hare (1795-1855). Though Hare’s family were wealthy Sussex landowners, and from the centre of the Anglican establishment, with bishops on both sides of the family, he was born at Valdagno, near Vicenza, in Italy. He came to England with his parents in 1799, but in 1804/05 spent a winter with them at Weimar, Germany, where as a precocious ten-year old, he learned German and met Goethe and Schiller, which triggered a lifelong interest in German literature and culture. In 1818, he became a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. After further trips abroad—no light undertaking at this period—he became assistant tutor at Trinity, from 1822 to 1832. If this sounds like a fairly junior position, akin perhaps to an “assistant lecturer” in today’s terms, this was, in fact, a senior post with (as Disraeli suggests) considerable power to influence favoured pupils. He was ordained in 1826, and in 1832 he resigned his post to take up the family living of Herstmonceux, in Sussex. In 1853 he was to become chaplain to Queen Victoria.

Hare’s personal library was said to have contained over 14,000 books—many of which were in German. An anonymous memoir from 1871 records that

you entered and found the whole house one huge library,—books overflowing in all corners, in hall on landing places, in bedrooms, and in dressing rooms . . . though it would be too much to say their owner had read them all, yet he had at least bought them all with a special purpose, knew where they were, and what to find in them, and often in the midst of a discussion, he would dart off to some remote corner, and return in a few minutes with the passage which was wanted as an authority or illustration. Each group of books (and a traceable classification persisted throughout the house) represented some stage in the formation of his mind,—the earlier scholarship, the subsequent studies in European literature and philosophy, the later in patristic and foreign theology.<sup>2</sup>

(The author of this unsigned memoir, incidentally, was another Cambridge man who deserves a footnote of his own. Edward Henry Palmer, a local boy from a humble background was a self-taught linguist who managed to learn Romany from the gypsies while still at the Perse School, here in Cambridge, and eventually became Professor of Arabic, Hindustani, and Persian at this University. In 1882 he was shot by Arab brigands in Egypt while returning from a secret service mission for the British government.)

Though Hare translated a number of important German works, including most notably, Niebuhr's massive *History of Rome*, he is chiefly remembered for a book with the distinctly un-arresting title of *Guesses at Truth*, which he produced together with his two brothers, Augustus and Marcus in 1827. Modelled vaguely on the *Athenaeum*, the short-lived journal of the German Jena Romantics—who, incidentally, invented the term “Romantic” in this literary sense—the Hare brothers' book was a collection of literary, philosophic, and religious aphorisms and fragments. Surprisingly, it sold well, with a second, and much-enlarged edition in 1838, and third in 1847, and was reprinted thereafter in 1867, 1871, and 1874. It was, for instance, one of a parcel of books ordered by Charlotte Brontë from her publishers in November 1849, along with a translation of Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann and Soret*.

Hare's enthusiasm for German literature, at a time when the language was rarely taught in Britain, and even more rarely read, is one of two important links with MacDonald. Whereas a knowledge of French was an essential for any educated person of the day, knowledge of German scarcely figured. The story of James Mill, the utilitarian philosopher, and father of John Stuart Mill, flipping through a volume of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and remarking, “Ah, yes. I see what poor Kant may be at . . .” may well be apocryphal, but it captures the prevailing mood of patronizing ignorance very well. It is certainly true that when, in 1821, Edward Bouverie Pusey, later to become Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, wanted to find out about recent developments in German theology, he could find only two men in the entire University who knew any German at all.<sup>3</sup> Cambridge was only marginally better off. Apart from Hare himself, there was Herbert Marsh, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, and the translator of Michaelis's *Introduction to the New Testament*, who had also done something to introduce German scholarship. A quick further check suggests something like five or six articulate Germanists in the whole country: Coleridge, Hare, Herbert Marsh, De Quincy and Carlyle—and, of course, MacDonald himself, who, you will remember, was charged by the elders of his Congregational church in Arundel with being “tainted with German theology.”

For MacDonald, as for many at this period, to be a Coleridgean was also immediately to be interested in all things German. The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 also ended 25 years of intellectual isolation from Continental ideas of all kinds, from French and German Romantic

theologians, poets, and critics, to Kantian philosophy, the Jena Romantics, and the writings of Goethe. In the next quarter century the tide changed sharply, with a flood of translations, and growing interest in a Germany that was still little known or understood. The improbable nexus of Coleridge's social thinking and enthusiasm for the German and the Gothick was not merely to herald a new intellectual fashion, it coincided with a much broader social trend—culminating, of course, with Queen Victoria's marriage to her German cousin, Albert of Saxe Coburg Gotha. In the 1840s and '50s things German were the flavour of the decade. Gloomy pine forests, mysterious gothic castles, sinister witches, dark caverns, inhabited by goblins, kobolds, and other creatures of the night were all the rage. A literary tradition perhaps begun by Horace Walpole, re-enforced by Novalis, Jean-Paul, and Goethe, not to mention Coleridge himself, was to be taken up by both Percy and Mary Shelley, MacDonald, William Morris, and continued down to Tolkien and J.K. Rowling in the present day.

It is in this fertile, even febrile, intellectual context that we need to see the no less strange, even gothic, idea of a secret society with limited membership lurking under the sporting and philistine surface of this ancient university. In its earliest days the Apostles were little more than members of a self-perpetuating debating society—Tennyson, another early member from 1827, and a near contemporary of Maurice and Sterling, was remembered as lying on the floor during meetings, and never contributing to the discussions. Certainly there was nothing very strange about university societies catering to all tastes—Oxford had the notorious Bullingdon Club, Cambridge the rather more sporting Hawks Club—but a secret *debating society* sounds rather more like a contradiction in terms. Who wants to shine just before an audience of never more than eleven others in some obscure undergraduate's room? Certainly not Disraeli, for instance!

The narrow, almost stifling, atmosphere of Hare's world is illustrated by his very close relationship with two of his students: Frederick Denison Maurice, and John Sterling, both very early members of the Apostles. Hare was to write a *Memoir* of John Sterling after his untimely death in 1844, and the same year married Maurice's sister, Esther. However, literary matters were also important. During his short life Sterling also wrote a novel in 1833, almost unbelievably *also* called *Coningsby*, ten years before Disraeli's appeared! He also produced a number of fantasy stories, "The Onyx Ring," "Land and Sea," "A Chronicle of England," and "The Palace of Morgana"—none of which achieved popularity anywhere nearly comparable with

MacDonald's, but again, suggest the very closeness of interests between the Scottish writer and his English counterparts.

Frederick Denison Maurice represented another side of MacDonald's interests. Though he also wrote fiction—including a novel entitled *Eustace Conway*, which had at least the distinction of being praised by Coleridge himself—what he is mostly famous for is his theology. Brought up a Unitarian, his time at this college, Trinity Hall, was cut short by his refusal to accept a Cambridge degree awarded then, as now, in the name of the Trinity. In the late 1820s he moved steadily towards a more Trinitarian Anglican position, and in 1835 he was ordained as an Anglican priest. *The Kingdom of Christ*, first published in 1838, was to establish him as one of the leading religious thinkers of his day, combining a Broad Church openness with what might be called High Church ecclesiology. This was quite enough to earn him the undying hatred of evangelicals and Anglo Catholics alike. The Church, for Maurice, was by definition “a universal spiritual society.” If it were not spiritual, it could not be universal; if it were not universal, it could not be spiritual. Unlike, say, Newman's conversion to Catholicism, where he was confronted from the outside by the awesome historical certainty of the Roman Catholic Church, Maurice insisted that “conversion” was more an inward matter of discovering that one was already a member of the Church—in the same way one came to consciousness and discovered oneself a member of a family. Though this attracted virulent criticism, which dogged him throughout his life, and even contributed to his dismissal from a professorship at Queen's College, London, in 1853, unlike many nineteenth theological tomes—not to mention Maurice's fiction—*The Kingdom of Christ* has shown unexpected staying power. The last time I came across a copy, it was being read by an IT specialist in America, who, with no hint of an antiquarian interest, recommended it to me as a “really good read”! It is a mark of Maurice's own spiritual qualities that, according to the twentieth century Anglican theologian, Alec Vidler, on one occasion a group of Victorian notables indulged in a game of who they wanted to be with them on their deathbed. Each wrote a name on a piece of paper. When they compared notes, they discovered that all of them had written the name of Maurice.

Though MacDonald had clearly read *The Kingdom of Christ* sometime before, he did not actually meet Maurice until 1858, when they became firm friends until Maurice's death in 1872. They not merely shared common views on Coleridge and German literature, but both had experience of persecution, having endured the humiliation of being expelled from their



respective posts—MacDonald at Arundel; Maurice from Queens College, London. Both, moreover, saw the very closest connections between theology and literature—even, perhaps, that theology was a literary form. Both would have agreed with Julius Hare’s aphorism in *Guesses at Truth* that “Poetry is philosophy, and philosophy is poetry.”<sup>4</sup>

Another Cambridge man, Charles Kingsley, though not an Apostle, was also a Coleridgean and a friend of both Maurice and MacDonald. Like Hare and Maurice, he became an Anglican clergyman and theologian, as well as eventually becoming (to the surprise of many) Regius Professor of History in Cambridge. Like MacDonald, and unlike most of the Apostles, Kingsley was also at home in the scientific debates of the time—especially the debates over Darwinism after 1859. What really links him to MacDonald, however, is his role in the creation of the relatively new literary genre of fantasy. As many of you will know, he was a friend of both Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald, and the manuscripts of the *Alice* books, *The Water-Babies*, and *Phantastes* were circulated between them for appreciation and comment—the latter especially by the Kingsley and MacDonald children. It was to the MacDonald family that Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) sent the manuscript of *Alice in Wonderland*. George read it aloud to his, by then, large family and it was young Greville MacDonald who declared there should be ten thousand copies of it printed. This close association of a new breed of fantasy writers was in retrospect a literary development of major importance, and Kingsley and MacDonald were among the very first not merely to produce major works in the genre, but also to write critical essays about what they were trying to do.<sup>5</sup>

That, however, is not my main theme. There is another strand to the complex relationships between MacDonald and this group of Cambridge Coleridgeans that has received much less attention—their social values. Not for nothing did I call attention to Disraeli’s somewhat unusual use of Coleridge at the beginning of this essay. It was he, of course, who first proclaimed the idea of “One Nation” Toryism that has received considerable debate—and, indeed, misattribution—in recent political debates, but the idea behind that, somewhat revolutionary, ideal—which first appears in one of Disraeli’s other novels, *Sybil: Or the Two Nations* (1845), can be traced straight back to Coleridge, even though he does not use those exact words in *Church and State*. That Disraeli, the convert Anglican Protestant Jew, should invoke the ideals of the monastic system in pre-reformation England in contrast with what he damningly names the “Venetian Oligarchy” of the rich,



as against the omnipresent poor, in his own time tells us much about what Carlyle was to call “the condition of England question” of the first half of the nineteenth century. Current debates about social inequality in this country pale into insignificance compared with the controversies of that period—especially when Darwinism was drawn into the debate by writers like Herbert Spencer to demonstrate that social inequality (and even perhaps slavery) was a biological norm rather than a social perversion.

In contrast, what was to become known as “Christian Socialism,” though it was founded and so named by the London barrister J.M. Ludlow in 1850, and included Kingsley, was for much of its early existence driven by former Apostles, especially, of course, by F.D. Maurice. The title was deliberately provocative. “Socialism” was a word for the most extreme anarchist beliefs in the 1840s. It was meant to shock, and for many of the middle classes it certainly did. It would be like “communist” in America of the 1950s, or “anarchist” today. The most potent form of socialism in the 1840s was probably in the writings of the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who coined the inflammatory slogan “property is theft” in his book *What is Property?* (1840). Though he was to be soon overtaken by other extremists—most famously by Karl Marx—there was alongside this contemporary attack on capitalist materialism a much older strand of Christian equalitarianism reaching back as far as St. Amrose, Basil of Caesarea, and best-known of all, St Francis of Assisi. Though Ludlow, who had been educated partly in Paris, was well aware of the French socialist movements of the period, the prime driving force of his new vision of society was, of course, these teachings and tradition of the New Testament. Despite Kingsley’s famous—or notorious—declaration that he was “a Church of England clergyman and . . . a Chartist,”<sup>6</sup> which had for many much the same revolutionary frisson, this “socialism” was more akin to the model of the later Fabian Society, whose ideal was peaceful, non-violent, change, taking a long view of social development.

In addition to Kingsley, Ludlow and Maurice, the new Victorian Christian Socialists included such well-known contemporary figures as John Ruskin, Thomas Hughes (author of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*), many of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the indefatigable Frederick James Furnivall—another graduate of this college, who not merely helped to found the Oxford English Dictionary, but also a whole raft of literary societies, including the Browning and the Shelley Societies. In particular, they pinned their hopes on an expansion

of education—especially higher education. They were not, of course, the first to try to expand the university intake. Pioneered by the short-lived Warrington Academy (1756-82), the direct ancestor of today's Harris-Manchester College, in Oxford, a series of new higher education institutions were planned. Jeremy Bentham's foundation of University College, London, followed in 1826, and then by King's College (1829), and Durham University (1832), both Anglican foundations. Less well-known, but still significant was John Keble's failed attempt to democratise Oxford itself in the 1830s.<sup>7</sup>

What brought all these figures together in the 1850s, however, were the very practical ideals of the London Working Men's College, founded by Ludlow in 1854, with the aim of spreading university level academic study to a class who (like Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*) had previously had little or no opportunity of higher education. Naturally, George MacDonald was in the audience to hear the opening lecture by Maurice, the first Principal of the College. Other working men's colleges in provincial cities quickly followed, in many cases, joining with the earlier, more secular, mechanics institutes to become embryonic provincial universities—as in the case of Manchester University. Anyone familiar with Oxbridge teaching of the period who reads these early lectures at the Working Men's College cannot fail to be impressed at their difficulty—especially when one remembers that these were evening lectures, delivered to men who had almost certainly already worked a 10 hour day! According to your viewpoint, these were either a tribute to the intelligence of these early socialist pioneers, or a monument to a colossal gap in the middle-class understanding of the needs of working men. Despite the warnings of John Stuart Mill, women, of course, were still largely ignored – or relegated to the new foundation of Queen's College.

What is very noticeable also is the range of material offered right from the start. Not merely were mechanics, engineering, and the necessary accompanying mathematics, on the curriculum, but with a rounded view of education, lectures on art criticism, history, literature, and theology were not merely represented, but actually delivered by many of the best-known public intellectuals of the day. Nevertheless, those associated with the college included older radicals such as Thomas Cooper, William Lovett, and Charles Southwell. Given how garbled the lecture notes of many undergraduates are today, it is a pity how few lecture notes we seem to have from the working men themselves. This is a subject well covered by my old friend J.F.C. Harrison, and, I hope here today, Timothy Larsen.

In a sense, therefore, Disraeli may have been more prophetic than he

could have known. Coleridge’s social ideas may not have been explosive in a modern journalistic sense—perhaps more like a slow-burning fuse—but, arguably, they represented one of the few lasting political ideas to emerge, since Burke, in the last two hundred years. They are, moreover, relevant. The idea of “one-nation” Toryism—most recently proclaimed by Teresa May herself in the last week; the belief that too great a gap between rich and poor is not merely immoral, but bad for the nation—in effect, therefore, bad politics—are both central to current debates. It was Tony Blair who declared at the beginning of this century that Christian Socialism had been the greatest single influence on his political beliefs—and, incidentally sent a whole phalanx of journalists scurrying off to the internet to find what Christian Socialism actually was. Despite a certain association between evangelical beliefs and a very rosy view of one’s own importance, the idea more generally of a Christian socio-political stance is not one that has disappeared from political life—indeed, it seems to have astonishing staying power.

“Some thoughts a acorns,” wrote Julius Hare in the first edition of *Guesses at Truth*, “would that any in this book were.”<sup>8</sup> He would no doubt have been gratified to see how, in the course of his century, the Coleridgean Christian social and political tradition that was at the heart of his book was never to move far from its literary roots, and nevertheless to influence an increasing range of practical policies. Yet it is also worth reminding ourselves that this is not a conference of political scientists, nor yet even of theologians. We welcome you today, because you are all here in form or another for primarily literary reasons, and Disraeli, for one, would have understood that perfectly.

#### Note

This essay was the keynote to the George MacDonald and the Cambridge Apostles conference held at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, England, from July 20-22, 2016.

#### Endnotes

1. William Raeper, *George MacDonald*, Tring, Herts: Lion Publishing, 1987. pp. 110-111.
2. See the (anonymous) “Memoir of Julius Hare,” in the 1871 edition of *Guesses at Truth*, Macmillan, p. xiv.
3. David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends*, John Murray, 1966, p. 78.
4. *Guesses at Truth* (1871) p. xxii.

5. See Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, 2nd edn. Baylor University Press, 2005. Ch. 5.
6. Charles E. Raven, *Christian Socialism 1848-1854*, Routledge, (1920), 1968, p. 139.
7. See Stephen Prickett, "Keble and the Anglican Tradition," *Modernity and the Reinvention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. 156- 168.
8. *Guesses at Truth* (1827) vol. ii, p. 79.