

## Ranald Bannerman: the hero as 'real' boy. Norchilnet August 2006

### Paper: Ranald Bannerman: the hero as 'real' boy

First published in serial form in 'Good Words for the Young' Nov 1869 – Oct 1870, Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood (RBB) holds premonitions of MacDonald's later books such as Princess and the Goblin (1872) and The Princess and Curdie<sup>1</sup>(1883) and includes autobiographical material. Indicators of MacDonald's views on for example, education<sup>2</sup> and allusions to political changes<sup>3</sup> make RBB as much a story for adults as for children.

Set in the North East of Scotland, MacDonald's home, the story begins with Ranald's earliest memory and ends with his departure to school and university. In between are all the agonies of growing up, punctuated by vivid episodes that act as stepping stones toward maturity.

At the time of publication, MacDonald had been living in England for approximately twenty years. His biographers Greville MacDonald, William Raeper, Rolland Hein, Elizabeth Sainsbury and Kathy Triggs all allude to *RBB* in order to illustrate incidents in MacDonald's early life and Sainsbury in particular blurs the boundary between biography and fiction in her use of quotation from it<sup>4</sup>. Thus Ranald Bannerman is presented by MacDonald as a 'real' boy with intimations of the ideal that become more fully developed in later works such as At the Back of the North Wind (1871), The Princess and the Goblin (1881), The Princess and Curdie (1883) and the adult novel Robert Falconer (1868).

The focus of this paper is the construct of Ranald Bannerman as boy hero in relation to the wider contemporary concept of the hero. By contemporary I refer to the second half of the nineteenth century, 1850 – 1900, in England.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example George MacDonald, Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood (London: Strahan and Co., 1871) 137, 216.

<sup>2</sup> MacDonald, Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 56.

<sup>3</sup> For example comments on the Poor Laws MacDonald, Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 186.

<sup>4</sup> See Greville MacDonald, George Macdonald and His Wife (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1924) 55. William Raeper, George Macdonald (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1987) 192. Rolland Hein, George Macdonald: Victorian Mythmaker (Nashville, Tenn.: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993) 14. Elizabeth Sainsbury, George Macdonald: A Short Life (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1987) 18, Kathy Triggs, The Stars and the Stillness: A Portrait of George Macdonald (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1986) 6.

The English bias is due to my starting point, which is the hero as theorised by Thomas Carlyle, but the construct of the hero he presented and which lodged in the contemporary mindset was drawn from wider, if mainly western, sources. Raeper referred to the text of RBB as 'George MacDonald's boyhood translated into English.' Raeper also notes that the Scottish character displays a dualism that enables the Scotsman to function within an English context without losing his Scottish cultural identity. His creativity, emotion and intuition could be called upon or reverted to as the occasion demanded (192).

Thomas Carlyle was a Scot who lived most of his adult life in England, and, like MacDonald, drew inspiration from German literature as well as classical sources. His exposition of the hero was wide-ranging. Though his lectures On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (1841) began with his argument on 'the great man' in the position of divinity, prophet, poet, priest and man of letters, Carlyle placed equal emphasis on the potential for the heroic in everyman and, as Carl Niemeyer notes, 'made moral character the final criteria of the greatness of a nation' (xix). The moral character Niemeyer refers to is based on Carlyle's emphasis on 'earnestness, courage and hard work – which if practised sufficiently will make us heroes' (xviii), 'us' being 'everyman'. It is the hero as 'everyman' that is the focus of my examination of Ranald Bannerman, rather than the hero as publicly conspicuous 'great man'.

Having established this emphasis I will immediately qualify it by noting Ranald Bannerman's particular response to literature and the encouragement given to him by his teacher<sup>5</sup> as a direct parallel to MacDonald's own experience<sup>6</sup>. MacDonald's detailed comment on the reading of poetry (George MacDonald, Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood) presages responses to his own readings as demonstrated in contemporary reviews<sup>7</sup> and MacDonald's later development as a writer places him in the position of both Carlyle's hero as poet and as man of letters, both of whom Carlyle regards as 'set apart' and able to present 'the reality which lies at the bottom of all appearance'<sup>8</sup> (Carlyle

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<sup>5</sup> MacDonald, Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood.

<sup>6</sup> MacDonald, George Macdonald and His Wife., Raeper, George Macdonald.

<sup>7</sup> See Wingfold

<sup>8</sup> In this passage Carlyle quotes Fichte's philosophy. As a reader of Carlyle (Raeper, George Macdonald.) and influenced by Fichte (see Dierdre Hayward, "George Macdonald and Three German

79). However, in his lecture on 'The Hero as Poet' (1840), Carlyle states 'we are all poets when we read a poem well' (Carlyle 82) and follows this observation that all men can be poets with 'even the commonest speech, has something of song in it' (Carlyle 83). Carlyle moves from the hero as 'great man' to the hero as 'everyman' within a few pages. Although RBB does not take Ranald beyond youth, there are indications that he has ability as a writer.<sup>9</sup> The implication is that as the fictional narrator of his own boyhood experiences written at a later date, he continued to write as did George MacDonald.

### **Relation to the wider contemporary construct of the hero**

Having established MacDonald's position in relation to RBB, I will investigate the contemporary construct of the hero before examining how Ranald Bannerman relates to this construct.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a figure had emerged which epitomised the construct of the 'Victorian' hero. This figure is the boy hero depicted in the work of G.A. Henty, writer of boy's adventure stories and critically perceived as the stereotypical nineteenth century ideal.<sup>10</sup> Although, he is an ideal, his character was a complex mix of influences ranging from the hero of classical literature through the Arnoldian boy and the muscular Christian promoted by Charles Kingsley and F.D. Maurice, to the hero of fairy tales. Henty however, created his heroes with the explicit purpose of reader emulation, as evidenced in many of his prefaces.<sup>11</sup> His stated intention was to create a boy hero who could be everyman as well as the 'conspicuous leader' cited by Niemeyer as integral to Carlyle's construct. (xi). The influences that construct the Henty hero can be summarised as those emanating from the classical, the adventure, the active and the fairy tale sources and comprise

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Thinkers," PhD., University of Dundee, 2000. the concept of the spiritual reality behind appearances is central to MacDonald's thought.

<sup>9</sup> For example his winning of the essay prize, MacDonald, Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 261.

<sup>10</sup> See Guy Arnold, Held Fast for England: G. A. Henty Imperialist Boy's Writer (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> For example G.A. Henty, Sturdy and Strong: Or How George Andrews Made His Way (London: Blackie and Son Limited, n.d.), G.A. Henty, The Young Colonists: A Story of the Zulu and Boer Wars, New edition ed. (London: Blackie and Son, 1897).

some of the following characteristics. I will investigate each of these categories, starting with the classical hero.

MacIntyre writes:

in those cultures where moral thinking and action is structured according to some version of the scheme I have called classical, the chief means of moral education is the telling of stories (121).

MacIntyre refers to Greek, Medieval and Renaissance cultures, all of which have influenced the development of Western thought. In MacIntyre's discussion of Aristotelian ethics, the classical hero is inextricably linked with activity in the public sphere of life, that is, how a person lives in society. According to MacIntyre, the foundation of all other virtues in this context is courage. Linked to courage are reliability, faithfulness, honesty, friendship, self restraint, wisdom and justice, without which the fifth century Greeks believed public order could not be sustained. Moving from public life to the battlefield, D. A. Russell discusses how Plutarch's concept of the 'great man' was influenced by connotations of the Greek view of the heroic and states 'they (that is the connotations) have directly helped to shape the concept of the heroic in European thinking' (24). Homer used the word 'heros' in reference to warriors who play a part in the action, their honour was, Russell notes 'the yardstick of every action' (24). They were fully human, had leadership qualities and 'won contests of skill and bravery' (24). Where the classical hero differs from the 'Victorian' hero is noted succinctly by Russell when he states that the Homeric hero is not 'an officer and a gentleman' (25). In her study Deconstructing the Hero (1997) Margery Hourihan observes that the hero is above all things 'a man of action'. Hourihan associates the active hero (always male) exclusively with the glorification of violence as the definition of manhood. The active hero may be the most clearly analogous with the 'Victorian hero' but the 'Victorian hero' is too simplistic a description since the Victorians, though pre-occupied with heroism, had a variety of views. There is some discrepancy between the active 'Victorian' hero and the muscular Christian games player which needs to be clarified at this point by outlining the construct of the Arnoldian boy.

The muscular Christian emphasis on physical activity was well suited to the institutional life of the English Public Schools. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of the Arnoldian boy, (exemplified in Thomas Hughes' Tom Brown) was familiar. He demonstrated 'manly virtues' not only in terms of physical prowess but also by his truthfulness and unselfishness.<sup>12</sup> The embryonic hero present in the ideal Arnoldian team player was the character cited by Luigi Barzini as operating by a limited set of fixed ideas, inculcated by his schooling and from which he did not have the imagination to deviate.<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin describes the hero of adventure as one who reacts in the correct way to further his fortunes when the opportunity arises. (116) He specialises in being in the right place at the right time. This opportunity is not just a matter of coincidence, action has to be taken. The second characteristic of the adventure hero according to Bakhtin is that he is not significantly changed by his experiences.

Lastly, there is one category of hero not usually associated with the work of Henty, that of the fairy tale hero. In traditional tales, the fairy tale hero is often found in the persona of the youngest or only son, a character described by Max Luthi as 'one of the true folk tale heroes' (65). He is often an orphan or at least has lost his father and his inheritance. The remit of this paper does not include an examination of the differences between folk and fairy tale, but the character is universal. The youngest or only son operates in the fairy tale world in which, as Maria Tatar states 'compassion counts' (79). He is characterised by unselfishness and a desire to help in response to immediate need and is not motivated by the expectation of a reward, though his actions usually result in good fortune.

Given this mix of heroic ideals, the 'Victorian' hero appears to be building into a prodigy, in the mould of Carlyle's 'great man', depicted in his examples of historical 'great men' rather than the potential 'everyman'. Though Carlyle begins each lecture with what he perceives as outstanding historical examples<sup>14</sup>, men whose thought influenced their societies<sup>15</sup>, he

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<sup>12</sup> See G.A. Henty, "True Heroism: A Talk with the Boys," *The Home Messenger* XII.. (1903).

<sup>13</sup> Luigi Barzini, *The Impossible Europeans* (London: Penguin, 1983) 53-54.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Mahomet, Dante, Shakespeare, Luther, Johnson, Rousseau, Cromwell.

nevertheless reaches a point at which he emphasises 'the heroism of everyman .... longing to do true and noble things' (Carlyle 70) until he states that with even the vestige of such a desire 'the dullest day drudge kindles into a hero' (Carlyle 71).

The characteristics of the 'Victorian' hero, summarised as

**Classical** – courage and honour

**Active** – initiative, courage, coolness in the face of danger, intelligence (but not cleverness), patriotism (but not nationalism), sincerity and integrity

**Adventure** – ability to seize opportunities fortuitously encountered and development of character without significant change

**Fairy tale** – compassion, self-sacrifice and disinterested action

are present in Ranald Bannerman and can be illustrated by specific episodes in the account of his boyhood.

Even as a young child, Ranald displays a resourcefulness and daring that set against a background of peer conformity in his escape from the Dame Shand's school. At the age of six, he recalls,

I found myself led by the ungentle hand of Mrs. Mitchell  
[the housekeeper] towards a little school on the outside of the  
village ... Mrs Mitchell opened the door and led me in. It was an  
awful experience (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 33-34).

There follows a description of Dame Shand's school, the room, the other children and the dog, which is guarding a child tied to the table leg. Ranald resolves to escape. The account continues 'And I soon had my first experience of how those are helped who will help themselves,' (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 36) a precept embedded in English nineteenth century culture through Samuel Smiles' Self Help (1859). Ranald runs away but faces an even greater difficulty than escape when he is pursued by the dog.

For one moment I felt as if I should sink to the earth for sheer  
terror. The next moment a wholesome rage sent the blood to my

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<sup>15</sup> "his thought became their way of thought" Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History Edited with an Introduction by Carl Niemeyer (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1966) 29.

brain (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 38).

Ranald attacks the dog, and escapes. Reflecting on this episode, he refers to the action prompted by 'rage'; with the observation 'I cannot call it courage', (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 38) followed by a brief discussion of the quality of courage. Ranald has however faced the danger and escaped, whilst the other children remain tyrannised by Dame Shand. His resourcefulness, a key quality in the active hero, continues as he finds a hiding place. At this point in the story a character is introduced with whom Ranald has most of his remaining boyhood adventures and who, apart from his origin, fits the mould of the 'Henty' hero not only as a boy, but in his later becoming a 'well-known' general (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 335). Turkey, the herd boy was 'a hero' (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 66) to Ranald and his two younger brothers. Apart from his ability to control cattle, including bulls, Turkey knew everything about the natural world and in this respect closely resembles Dickon from *The Secret Garden* (1911). Ranald recalls, 'Short of flying, we believed him capable of everything imaginable' (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 67). Had he been English, Turkey's origin might have excluded him from rising to become a General as a hero of a Henty story. As a Scottish Highlander his origin was less of a barrier to advancement. His impoverished position as a cow herd with no father and his care for those around him qualify him as fairy tale hero whilst his soldierly accomplishments demonstrate the characteristics of the classical hero. His qualities of leadership, resourcefulness and courage are typical of the active hero and are displayed to the full in the episode involving Wandering Willie.

Wandering Willie is described as a 'half-witted' person 'commonly styled Foolish Willie. His approach was announced by a wailful strain upon the bagpipes .... ' His dress was 'the agglomeration of ill-supplied necessity and superfluous whim' as he attached coloured ribbon and bits of rag to his clothes and his pipes. 'When he danced he was like a whirlwind that had caught up the contents of an old clothes shop.' This figure caused both fascination and fear in the children and was used as a threat by Mrs Mitchell, who maintained that if Ranald and his brothers did not behave 'she would give this one or that one to Foolish Willie to take away with him.' Although this never happened, 'One day, in early summer ..... wee Davie disappeared'

(Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 100,02,03). Ranald soon discovered that Willie had carried him off and whilst the adults were debating what to do, Ranald ran straight to Turkey, who, he felt sure, would know. '(Turkey) set off at a swinging trot in the direction of a little rocky knoll in a hollow .... which he knew to be a favourite haunt of Wandering Willie.' Willie was there, with Davie, but it took all Turkey's resourcefulness and coolness to retrieve Davie. Willie was strong, unpredictable and beyond reason. Turkey managed to steal his pipes while Ranald rescued Davie. He treated them in such a way that 'the pipes cried out at every kick' and Willie, who 'was more attached to them than to any living creature' turned from his pursuit of Ranald and Davie 'and once again pursued his pipies' (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 104,08,01,10).

The details of this adventure demonstrate Turkey's finely balanced timing in the execution of his tactics to achieve the rescue in what was a genuinely dangerous situation. Ranald of course played a major role in Davie's rescue, but without Turkey's strategy it could never have been achieved.

As Ranald matures, episodes such as the rescue extend to incorporate that element of spiritual growth so integral to MacDonald's work. The inclusion of failure, in the chapter 'I Go Down Hill' is paralleled by Curdie in The Princess and Curdie (1883) when, as Curdie grew older 'he was gradually changing into a commonplace man' (The Princess and Curdie 22). Realisation of his degeneration comes to Ranald, as it did to Curdie, in a crisis precipitated by his own destructive action. In Carlyle's second lecture ('The Hero as Prophet', 1840) he states 'Is not a man's walking, in truth, always 'a succession of falls?' (Carlyle 47). Carlyle's exposition follows in terms of how the hero reacts to his 'falls', which he views as necessary to his 'struggle ... onwards' (47). More recently, a comment that 'a hero must be imperfect or how can s/he be real' (Jong 144) reinforces the concept of the hero as everyman and is demonstrated by the unexpected appearance of an explicitly imperfect 'Victorian' hero in Henty's Rujub the Juggler (1893). (Bathurst is literally paralysed with fear at the sound of gunfire) Henty's discussion of the distinction between moral and physical courage in this text is closer to MacDonald's emphasis on moral and spiritual courage, an essential characteristic of the hero according to Carlyle, than to the stereotypical figure of the Henty, and by implication the 'Victorian' active hero.



Within the discussion about how the hero reacts to his fear in RBB, is a pragmatic comment made by Andrew, the stable man, Ranald had been frightened by a mysterious noise emanating from a remote cottage at night. Andrew thought it best to investigate, at which Ranald asks

“Won’t you be frightened Andrew?”

“Frightened? ... It’s all waste to be frightened before you know whether a thing is worth it.” (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 209)

Such a perspective comes from a character Carlyle terms ‘any kind of hero’ (69).

### **Conclusion**

The essence of the hero in all four of Carlyle’s lectures is ‘the sincere man’. Ranald’s maturity demonstrates his possession of sincerity when, at the close of the story Ranald is faced with a loss after which, he wrote, ‘I ceased to be a boy’ (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 333). His story is framed by loss. At the beginning, the loss of his mother, about which he says ‘my sorrow was soon over ..... (children) must not begin life with a burden of loss’ (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 18). At the end he encounters the grief of Turkey in the loss of his fiancée, and wrote ‘my whole being was humbled’ (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 333). Ranald had believed himself in love with the same girl, but recognised ‘my love grew ... a pale and feeble thing ... I wept for him, not for myself’ (Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood 333).

Throughout the story instances of Carlyle’s hero as everyman can be evidenced from RBB, which, together with elements demonstrating the construct of the ‘Victorian’ hero, place both Ranald and Turkey within the wider context of the contemporary concept of heroism.

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