

George MacDonald

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George MacDonald

Born: December 10, 1824
Huntly, Scotland

Died: September 18, 1905
Ashstead (Surrey), England

Occupation: Journalist, Novelist

Genres: Fantasy, Christian apologetics,

Influences: Christianity, Scottish folk literature,
Novalis

Influenced: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, G.K.
Chesterton, Mark Twain

George MacDonald (December 10, 1824 – September 18, 1905) was a Scottish author, poet, and Christian minister.

Though no longer well known, his works (particularly his fairy tales and fantasy novels) have inspired admiration in such notables as W. H. Auden, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Madeleine L'Engle. C. S. Lewis wrote that he regarded MacDonald as his "master". Picking up a copy of *Phantastes* one day in a train station (presumably from a railway

station bookstall), he began to read; "a few hours later," said Lewis, "I knew I had crossed a great frontier." G. K. Chesterton cited *The Princess and the Goblin* as a book that had "made a difference to my whole existence". Elizabeth Yates wrote of *Sir Gibbie* that "[i]t moved me the way books did when as a child ... Now and then a book is read as a friend, and after it life is not the same ... *Sir Gibbie* did this to me." Even Mark Twain, who initially despised MacDonald, became friends with him, and there is some evidence that Twain was influenced by MacDonald (see links below for an article on the subject).

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Biography

The man who was to inspire such feeling was born on December 10, 1824 at Huntly, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. His father, a farmer, was one of the MacDonalds of Glen Coe, and a direct descendant of one of the families that suffered in the massacre of 1692. The Doric dialect of the area frequently appears in the dialogue of some of his non-fantasy novels.

MacDonald grew up influenced by his Congregational Church, with an atmosphere of Calvinism. But MacDonald never felt comfortable with some aspects of Calvinist doctrine; indeed, legend has it that when the doctrine of predestination was first explained to him, he burst into tears (although assured that he was one of the elect). Later novels, such as *Robert Falconer* and *Lilith*, show a distaste for the Calvinist idea that God's electing love is limited to some and denied to others. Especially in his *Unspoken Sermons* he shows a highly developed theology.

He took his degree at the University of Aberdeen, and then went to London, studying at Highbury College for the Congregational ministry.

In 1850 he was appointed pastor of Trinity

Congregational Church, Arundel, but his sermons (preaching God's universal love and the possibility that none would, ultimately, fail to unite with God) met with little favour and his salary was cut in half. Later he was engaged in ministerial work in Manchester. He left that because of poor health, and after a short sojourn in Algiers he settled in London and taught for some time at the University of London. MacDonald was also for a time editor of *Good Words for the Young*, and lectured successfully in the United States during 1872-1873.

His best-known works are *Phantastes*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *At the Back of the North Wind*, and *Lilith*, all fantasy novels, and fairy tales such as — "The Light Princess", "The Golden Key", and "The Wise Woman". "I write, not for children," he wrote, "but for the child-like, whether they be of five, or fifty, or seventy-five." MacDonald also published some volumes of sermons, the pulpit not having proved an unreservedly successful venue.

MacDonald also served as a mentor to Lewis Carroll (the pen-name of Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson); it was MacDonald's advice, and the enthusiastic reception of *Alice* by MacDonald's

three young daughters, that convinced Carroll to submit *Alice* for publication. Carroll, one of the finest Victorian photographers, also created photographic portraits of the girls and their brother Greville.

MacDonald was also friends with John Ruskin and served as a go-between in Ruskin's long courtship with Rose la Touche.

MacDonald was acquainted with most of the literary luminaries of the day; a surviving group photograph shows him with Tennyson, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Trollope, Ruskin, Lewes, and Thackeray. While in America he was a friend of Longfellow and Walt Whitman.

In 1877 he was given a civil list pension. He died on September 18, 1905 in Ashstead (Surrey). He was cremated and buried in Bordighera.

As hinted above, MacDonald's use of fantasy as a literary medium for exploring the human condition greatly influenced a generation of such notable authors as C. S. Lewis (who featured him as a character in his *The Great Divorce*), J. R. R. Tolkien, and Madeleine L'Engle. MacDonald's non-fantasy novels, such as *Alec Forbes*, had their

influence as well; they were among the first realistic Scottish novels, and as such MacDonald has been credited with founding the "kailyard school" of Scottish writing.

His son Greville MacDonald became a noted medical specialist, and also wrote numerous novels for children. Greville ensured that new editions of his father's works were published.

Theology

MacDonald rejected the doctrine of penal Substitutionary atonement as put forward by John Calvin which argues that Christ has taken the place of sinners and is punished by God in their place, believing that in turn it raised serious questions about the character and nature of God. Instead, he taught that Christ had come to save people from their sins, and not from a Divine penalty for their sins. The problem was not the need to appease a wrathful God but the disease of cosmic evil itself. George MacDonald frequently described the Atonement in terms similar to the Christus Victor theory. MacDonald posed the rhetorical question, "Did he not foil and slay evil by letting all the waves and billows of its horrid sea break upon

him, go over him, and die without rebound—spend their rage, fall defeated, and cease? Verily, he made atonement!"

MacDonald was convinced that God does not punish except to amend, and that the sole end of His greatest anger is the amelioration of the guilty. As the doctor uses fire and steel in certain deep-seated diseases, so God may use hell-fire if necessary to heal the hardened sinner. MacDonald declared, "I believe that no hell will be lacking which would help the just mercy of God to redeem his children." MacDonald posed the rhetorical question, "When we say that God is Love, do we teach men that their fear of Him is groundless?" He replied, "No. As much as they fear will come upon them, possibly far more. . . . The wrath will consume what they *call* themselves; so that the selves God made shall appear."

However, true repentance, in the sense of freely chosen moral growth, is essential to this process, and, in MacDonald's optimistic view, inevitable for all beings. He recognized the theoretical possibility that, bathed in the eschatological divine light, some might perceive right and wrong for what they are but still refuse to be transfigured by operation of God's fires of love, but he did not think this likely.

In this theology of divine punishment, MacDonald stands in agreement with the Greek Church Fathers St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, although it is unknown whether MacDonald had a working familiarity with Patristics or Eastern Orthodox Christianity. At least an indirect influence is likely, because F. D. Maurice who influenced MacDonald knew the Greek Fathers, especially Clement, very well. MacDonald states his theological views most distinctly in the sermon Justice found in the third volume of *Unspoken Sermons*.

In his introduction to *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, C. S. Lewis speaks highly of MacDonald's theology:

"This collection, as I have said, was designed not to revive MacDonald's literary reputation but to spread his religious teaching. Hence most of my extracts are taken from the three volumes of *Unspoken Sermons*. My own debt to this book is almost as great as one man can owe to another: and nearly all serious inquirers to whom I have introduced it acknowledge that it has given them great help-sometimes indispensable help toward the very acceptance

of the Christian faith. . . . I know hardly any other writer who seems to be closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself. Hence his Christ-like union of tenderness and severity. Nowhere else outside the New Testament have I found terror and comfort so intertwined. . . . In making this collection I was discharging a debt of justice. I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. But it has not seemed to me that those who have received my books kindly take even now sufficient notice of the affiliation. Honesty drives me to emphasize it."

In pop culture

Rock group The Waterboys titled their album *Room to Roam* after a passage in MacDonald's *Phantastes*. The works *Lilith* and *Phantastes* are both named as books in a library, in the title track of their album, *Universal Hall*. They also based the song *A Church Not Made With Hands* on one of the Narnia stories, confirming the enduring link in modern pop culture between Macdonald and Lewis.

A verse from *The Light Princess* is cited in the *Beauty and the beast* song by Nightwish.

Selected Quotations

- To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved.
- The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is — not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself. (The Fantastic Imagination)
- Two people may be at the same spot in manners and behaviour, and yet one may be getting better, and the other worse, which is the greatest of differences that could possibly exist between them. (The Princess and Curdie)
- That which is in a man, not that which lies beyond his vision is the main factor in what is about to befall him: the operation upon him is the event. (Lillith, Chapter XVI)

- What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. (Phantastes)
- Were I asked, what is a fairytale? I should reply, Read Undine: that is a fairytale ... of all fairytales I know, I think Undine the most beautiful. (The Fantastic Imagination)
- As the thoughts move in the mind of a man, so move the worlds of men and women in the mind of God...the offspring of his imagination. Man is but a thought of God.
- After a few days, Willie got tired of [the water-wheel] — and no blame to him, for it was no earthly use beyond amusement, and that which can only amuse can never amuse long. I think the reason children get tired of their toys so soon is just that it is against human nature to be really interested in what is of no use. If you say that a beautiful thing is always interesting, I answer, that a beautiful thing is of the highest use. Is not the diamond that flashes all its colours into the heart of a poet as useful as the diamond with which the glazier divides the sheets of glass into panes for our windows? (The

Gutta Percha Willie)

- A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean. If my drawing, on the other hand, is so far from being a work of art that it needs THIS IS A HORSE written under it, what can it matter that neither you nor your child should know what it means? It is there not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning. — But a man may then imagine in your work what he pleases, what you never meant! — Not what he pleases, but what he can. If he be not a true man, he will draw evil out of the best; we need not mind how he treats any work of art! If he be a true man, he will imagine true things; what matter whether I meant them or not? (The Fantastic Imagination)
- If sin must be kept alive, then hell must be kept alive; but while I regard the smallest sin as infinitely loathsome, I do not believe that any being, never good enough to see the essential ugliness of sin, could sin so as to deserve such punishment. I am not now, however, dealing with the question of the duration of punishment, but with the idea of punishment itself; and would only say in

passing, that the notion that a creature born imperfect, nay, born with impulses to evil not of his own generating, and which he could not help having, a creature to whom the true face of God was never presented, and by whom it never could have been seen, should be thus condemned, is as loathsome a lie against God as could find place in heart too undeveloped to understand what justice is, and too low to look up into the face of Jesus. (Unspoken Sermons Series III, 'Justice')

Partial list of works

- *Within and Without* (1856)
- *Poems* (1857)
- *Phantastes* (1858)
- *David Elginbrod* (1862)
- *The Tutor's First Love* (1863)
- *Adela Cathcart* (1864)
- *The Light Princess* (1864, in *Adela Cathcart*)
- *Alec Forbes of*
- *The Baron's Apprenticeship* (1876 (originally published as *There and Back*)^[2])
- *The Marquis of Lossie* (1877)
- *Sir Gibbie* (1879) (republished as *The Baronet's Song*)
- *A Daughter's Devotion* (1881) (originally published as *Mary*)

Howglen (1865)
(also published as
*The Maiden's
Bequest*)^[1]

- *Annals of a Quiet
Neighbourhood*
(1866)
- *The Golden Key*
(1867)
- *Robert Falconer*
(1868)
- *The Seaboard
Parish* (1868)
- *The Musician's
Quest* (1868)
- *At the Back of the
North Wind* (1871)
- *Ranald
Bannerman's
Boyhood* (1871)
- *The Princess and
the Goblin* (1872)
- *The Vicar's
Daughter* (1872)
- *The History of
Gutta-Percha
Willie, the
Working Genius*
(1873)

Marston)

- *A Gentlewoman's
Choice* (1882)
(originally
published and often
available as
*Weighed and
Wanting*)^{[3][4]}
- *Warlock O'
Glenwarlock* (also
entitled *The Laird's
Inheritance* or
Castle Warlock)^[5]
[6]
- *The Highlander's
Last Song/The
Gentleman's Choice*
(unknown date of
publication)^[7]
- *Donal Grant*
(1883)
- *The Shepherd's
Castle* (1883)
(Companion story
of Gibbie and his
friend Donal:^[8]
- *The Princess and
Curdie* (1883,

- *Malcolm* (1875)
(two-volume work
containing *The
Fisherman's Lady*
and *The Marquis'
Secret*)
- *The Lost Princess*
(1875)
- *The Lady's
Confession* (1879)
- *The Curate's
Awakening* {1876}
- sequel to ' *The
Princess and the
Goblin* ')
- *The Elect Lady*
(1888) (also
published as *The
Landlady's Master
and Home Again*)
[9][10]
- *The Peasant Girl's
Dream* (1893)
(originally
published as
Heather and Snow)
[11]
- *Lilith* (1895)
- *The Minister's
Restoration* (1896)
(also published as
Salted with Fire)
[12][13]

Footnotes

1. ^ <http://icsun.ithaca.edu:88/jbarr/theLib/lib3.txt>
retrieved on July 5, 2007
2. ^ <http://icsun.ithaca.edu:88/jbarr/theLib/lib3.txt>
retrieved on July 5, 2007
3. ^ <http://icsun.ithaca.edu:88/jbarr/theLib/lib3.txt>

4. ^
<http://pford.stjohnsem.edu/ford/cslewis/documents20Bibliography%20Hein.pdf>
5. ^ <http://icsun.ithaca.edu:88/jbarr/theLib/lib3.txt>
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6. ^
<http://pford.stjohnsem.edu/ford/cslewis/documents20Bibliography%20Hein.pdf> retrieved on July 5, 2007
7. ^ <http://www.springsmc.org/Home/History>
retrieved on July 5, 2007
8. ^ <http://dpi.state.wi.us/rll/wrlbph/series.html>
retrieved on July 5, 2007
9. ^ <http://www.johannesen.com/summaries.htm>
retrieved on July 5, 2007
10. ^ <http://icsun.ithaca.edu:88/jbarr/theLib/lib3.txt>
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11. ^
[http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?
&isbn=1556610238&y=0&nsa=1](http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?&isbn=1556610238&y=0&nsa=1) retrieved July 5, 2007
12. ^ <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/m/george-macdonald/ministers-restoration.htm> retrieved on July 5, 2007
13. ^ <http://icsun.ithaca.edu:88/jbarr/theLib/lib3.txt>
retrieved on July 5, 2007

See also

- Mythopoeia (genre)

Further Reading

- *North Wind. A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*. The journals of the George MacDonald Society
- Greville MacDonald, George MacDonald and his Wife, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924 (republished 1998 by Johannesen ISBN 1-881084-63-9)
- William Raeper, George MacDonald. Novelist and Victorian Visionary, Lion Publishing, 1987
- Thomas Gerold, Die Gotteskindschaft des Menschen. Die theologische Anthropologie bei George MacDonald, Münster: Lit, 2006 ISBN 3-8258-9853-9 (A study of MacDonald's theology).

External links

- E-texts
 - *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* on the University of Virginia Library's web site
 - Works by George MacDonald at Project Gutenberg
 - Johannesen Printing & Publishing

- Christian Classics Ethereal Library
- Faerie Tales and Romantic Literature
- George-Macdonald.com
- Extracts from Scribner's Monthly, etc. containing a few poems and translations of Novalis (Cornell University's "Making of America" Journal Collection)
- Several Works at Penn State University's Electronic Classics (pdf format)
- Works by George MacDonald & Michael Phillips
- George MacDonald on The Victorian Web
- Mark Twain and George MacDonald: The Salty and the Sweet
- George MacDonald Society
- Life and Works of George MacDonald
- The Golden Key website
- Free audio recording of "The Golden Key" at " Librivox

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