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ONLINE ARTICLE

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Two Essays on George MacDonald

by G.K. Chesterton

Perhaps because George MacDonald rapidly lost popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century, these two essays by Chesterton were never reprinted and have been somewhat forgotten. Both Chesterton and MacDonald scholars often quote from Chesterton's introduction to Greville MacDonald's biography of his father, but references to these two earlier works are extremely scarce.

The first essay from 11 June 1901, "George Macdonald and His Work",¹ was one of Chesterton's earliest articles in the Daily News, the first newspaper to give Chesterton a weekly column and thus a "turning-point of [his] journalistic fate". In his *Autobiography* Chesterton describes how this column gave him "a Saturday pulpit, rather like a Sunday pulpit" (120). He had begun regular contributions less than two weeks previously on 31 May 1901, and, interestingly, he was married to Frances Blogg just over two weeks later on 28 June 1901. At this pivotal moment in his life Chesterton seized upon the somewhat insignificant reissue of MacDonald's novel *The Marquis of Lossie* to comment upon the neglected Victorian writer and, because of the harmony of their views, to expound his own philosophy. Like later thinkers such as Tolkien and Lewis, Chesterton downplays MacDonald's realistic novels and highlights the extraordinary vitality of his fantasies and fairytales. Unlike these writers, however, Chesterton is more interested in the light and playful aspects of the stories than in the dark and weighty theme of death. For example, Chesterton says that MacDonald has a profound "realisation of the grotesque in the spiritual world" that he displays in his poetry for children. MacDonald's verses are better even than Lewis Carroll's, for MacDonald wrote "celestial nonsense" that was full of "cosmic camaraderie".

The later essay from 23 September 1905 was prompted by MacDonald's death on the 18th of September and as a result is slightly less exuberant than the earlier article. Chesterton boldly declares MacDonald to be "one of the three or four greatest men of 19th century Britain," considered from the perspective of originality of outlook. Like Walt Whitman, another of Chesterton's literary heroes, MacDonald was "a sayer of great things" who possessed a "celestial wit". MacDonald was a Celtic mystic, but unlike W. B. Yeats and other modern mystics who delight in philosophical vagueness, MacDonald loved clarity, brightness, and actuality. His death, concludes Chesterton, is just the next step "into a world of dreadful actuality, of a deepening and dreadful joy".

Together with the manuscript essays that Chesterton wrote on MacDonald in his journals, these articles further substantiate Chesterton's claim that

MacDonald's stories "made a difference to [his] whole existence" (Introduction 9). But not only do they reveal more clearly MacDonald's influence on Chesterton; they also highlight some vital aspects of MacDonald's writing that have been somewhat undervalued—most notably his nonsense poetry and the jovial playfulness of his fairytales.

Daniel Gabelman

Notes

¹ The editors of *SEVEN* have chosen to retain G.K. Chesterton's idiosyncratic spelling of MacDonald in the following articles. However, as these are not intended to be facsimile reproductions but rather to convey the original text as clearly as possible, small changes have been made, such as the italicizing of book titles and the removal of the following original publication note from "George Macdonald and His Work": " 'The Marquis of Lossie.' By George Macdonald. George Newnes. 6d."

Works Cited

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About the Contributor

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George Macdonald and His Work

By G.K. Chesterton
The Daily News, June 11, 1901

One by one the eminent novelists of the Victorian era are being born again to the democracy in the form of cheap editions, so that by this time the aspiring chimney-sweep could really buy the nucleus of a very good paper library for a few shillings. There is one novelist whom Messrs. Newnes have just noticed in this manner who is, unless I am mistaken, one of the most remarkable men of our time. Dr. George Macdonald will be discovered some day, as Blake, another man of genius, artistically faulty, has been discovered: until then he will be, like Blake, neglected, contemned, and quarried industriously by people who wish to borrow ideas. If to be a great man is to hold the universe in one's head or heart, Dr. Macdonald is great. No man has carried about with him so naturally heroic an atmosphere. At one time he used to give performances of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, appearing himself as Great-heart: And the mere possibility of the thing is typical, for it would be possible with no other modern man. The idea of Matthew Arnold in spangled armour, of Professor Huxley waving a sword before the footlights, would not impress us with unmixed gravity. But Dr. Macdonald seemed an elemental figure, a man unconnected with any particular age, a character in one of his own fairy tales, a true mystic to whom the supernatural was natural.

Many religious writers have written allegories and fairy tales, which have gone to creating the universal conviction that there is nothing that shows so little spirituality as an allegory, and nothing that contains so little imagination as a fairy tale. But from all these Dr. Macdonald is separated by an abyss of profound originality of intention. The difference is that the ordinary moral fairy tale is an allegory of real life. Dr. Macdonald's tales of real life are allegories, or disguised versions, of his fairy tales. It is not that he dresses up men and movements as nights and dragons, but that he thinks that knights and dragons, really existing in the eternal world, are dressed up here as men and movements. It is not the crown, the helmet, or the aureole that are to him the fancy dress; it is the top hat and the frock coat that are, as it were, the disguise of the terrestrial stage conspirators. His allegoric tales of gnomes and griffins do not lower a veil, but rend it. In one of those strange, half-decipherable books, like the wild books of a prophet, which he has published in his old age, the hero is shown a glorious rose-bush, and told that it is standing in the same place as the piano in his drawing-room. To understand this idea is to understand George Macdonald, so long as we remember that it is not the rose-bush that is the symbol, but the piano.

In the book with which Messrs. George Newnes have opened the cheap publication of Mr. Macdonald's work, *The Marquis of Lossie*, this is clearly

shown. It is not one of his best; artistically speaking, it teems with faults. But almost all the faults of this novel are the virtues of a fairy tale. The clearness of the ethical issue, the unclouded war of light against darkness, with no twilight or skepticism or timidity; the elemental sense of landscape and of man as the child of Nature, the stainless heroism of the heroes, the patent deformity of the evil characters; all this shows a spirit which looks out upon the world with the young and innocent and terrible eyes of Jack the Giant-Killer. Dr. Macdonald is far too good a poet to be a good novelist in the highest sense; for it is the glory of the novelist to look at humanity from a hundred standpoints: it is the glory of the poet to look at it from one. Dr. Macdonald sees the world bathed in one awful crimson of the divine love; he cannot look through the green spectacles of the cynic even for a moment. He can no more describe the cynic than Shelley could have described a Baptist grocer or Keats a City merchant. The fashionable scoundrels in Dr. Macdonald's novel are not the inane, good-humoured, automatic beasts of the field, as dignified and calm as cows, that such men really are. They are unintelligible, ugly creatures, like the dragons of a fairy tale, eating maidens from an unearthly caprice. They exist to be fought, not studied.

But the interesting point about *The Marquis of Lossie* is this, and it contains the whole secret of Dr. Macdonald's work: It is the story of a young Scotch fisherman who, in his impregnable simplicity and honour, goes up to a fashionable house in London, in order to rescue a fashionable lady (whom he knows to be his half-sister) from a disgraceful marriage de convenance. The story, as I have said, is not told with anything like the full measure of Dr. Macdonald's art; it is difficult to lay one's finger on a single scene which is quite properly proportioned, which has not too much philosophy and too little psychology. Yet the whole story is as vivid and as tense as a detective story. We read it with a profound sense of something greatly exciting us, and we cannot tell what it is. Then it will become clear to us if we happen to remember Dr. Macdonald's magnificent fairy tale, *The Princess and Curdie*. That tells of a miner-boy, who, under the mysterious commands of a fairy grandmother, goes to save a king and a princess from the plots of a monstrous and evil city. Suddenly we realize that the two stories are the same, that one runs inside the other, and that the realistic novel is the shell and the fairy tale the kernel. All the awkwardness, all the digression, all the abruptness or slowness of incident, merely mean that the hero longs to throw off the black hat and coat of Malcolm MacPhail and declare himself as Curdie, the champion of the faeries. All the excitement of the story lay in the fact that we knew that he was so.

Dr. Macdonald enters fairyland like a citizen returning to his home. But though a genuine mystic and a genuine Celt, he has not reappeared in the movement of Celtic mysticism which has taken place in our time, chiefly because of that singular idea which has taken possession of it, that it is the

duty of a mystic to be melancholy. It will take them a century or two perhaps to realise the truth that Dr. Macdonald, I fancy, has always known, that melancholy is a frivolous thing compared with the seriousness of joy. Melancholy is negative, and has to do with trivialities like death: joy is positive and has to answer for the renewal and perpetuation of being. Melancholy is irresponsible; it could watch the universe fall to pieces: joy is responsible and upholds the universe in the void of space. This conception of the vigilance of the universal Power fills all Dr. Macdonald's novels with the unfathomable gravity of complete happiness, the gravity of a child at play. A curious glow pervades his books: the flowers seem like coloured flames broken loose from the flaming heart of the world: every bush of gorse is a burning bush, burning for the same cause as that of Moses. This sense of a perfect secret almost painfully kept by the universe is what shames the weariness of modern mystics. As if anyone who knew a secret could be weary.

There is another artistic matter in which Dr. Macdonald gave a profoundly original lead, and a lead which has never been followed. This was in his realisation of the grotesque in the spiritual world. He has written children's poems full of a kind of nocturnal anarchy, like farcical dreams. The Owl says:

I can see the wind: now who can do that?
I can see the dreams that he has in his hat.
Who else can watch the Lady-Moon sit
Hatching the boats and the long-legged fowl
On her nest the sea, all night, but the Owl?

These wild weddings of ideals have no priest that can join them, except the naked imagination. But the point of Dr. Macdonald's originality lies in this: that while other modern authors have written nonsense, he alone has written what may be called celestial nonsense. The world of *Alice in Wonderland* is one of purely intellectual folly: there are times, indeed, which must have come to any imaginative man, when he feels suddenly homeless and horror-stricken in the world of mathematical madness, when he feels unreason to be colder and crueller than reason, and when he realises the deep truth that nothing on earth is so desolate as unlimited levity. But Dr. Macdonald's world of extravagance, where the moon hatches the ships and the oysters gape to sing, is penetrated through and through with a warmth of world-love, the cosmic camaraderie of the child. Even monsters are pets in that enormous nursery.

As I have said, Dr. Macdonald will not be discovered for some time to come. There are men and movements which the moment they have passed are at their furthest from us, like some point of a wheel when it has just touched the ground. We live now among poets who cannot conceive of the universal power containing any larger feelings than their own; they cannot

imagine, in the tremendous words of Dante, “the love that drives the sun and all the stars,” for the loves of which they write would not drive thistle-down. But the great thought which Dr. Macdonald utters and leaves unuttered alike in a kind of fatalistic optimism will never wholly cease to haunt and attack us. At a hundred odd moments, in crooked streets, in twilight fields, in lamp-lit drawing-rooms, there will come upon us the confounding, and yet comforting, notion that we and all our nationalistic philosophies are all in the heart of a fairy tale and playing an uncommonly silly part in it.

George Macdonald

By G.K. Chesterton

The Daily News, September 23, 1905

If we test the matter by strict originality of outlook, George Macdonald was one of the three or four greatest men of 19th century Britain. He does not in the ordinary sense occupy that position, because his art, though highly individual and fanciful, does not reach the level of his thought and passion. In the matter of expression, indeed, he suffered from his originality in a way that is more common than people realize. A man with a view of his own often cannot convey it to others, not because he does not understand his own view, but because he does not understand theirs. He does not know which part of his truth they know and which they do not know. He does not know if at his first word they will turn from him as a bore or tear him to pieces as a blasphemer; whether his message will be inscribed in copy-books or burnt by the common hangman. Hence arises a peculiar quality which may be noticed in the works of almost every man with a novel point of view; I mean, a tendency to become for a time unaccountably weak and obvious, to labour the simplest pieces of sentiment, to write pages of platitude. This, as I say, exists par excellence in the original men. It was so with Dickens. It was so with Victor Hugo. It was so with Ruskin. It was so with Thackeray. It was so most assuredly with George Macdonald. But these bursts of mysterious dullness or mysterious feebleness are, as above suggested, the direct product of the writer's bold independence and intense originality. He is so independent of conventions that he becomes conventional by accident. He is so unconscious of the beaten track that he even walks in it.

To appreciate properly men like Macdonald, it is necessary to remember a type of man who is a pillar of simple societies, but whom complex societies tend to turn into something else. I mean the sage, the sayer of things. He is not the poet, for he does not sing; he is not the prose writer, for generally he cannot write. The things he produces form an artistic class by themselves; they are logia or great passionate maxims, the proverbs of philosophy. Confucius was a man of this kind, and the real Socrates and most of the founders of the great religions. But in our modern and respectable and highly-specialised world we do not like to leave an old gentleman loose about the streets merely saying things. The man who is naturally and spiritually of this type is in our time forced to pretend to be something else, a minor poet or a novelist, or some sad kind of political reformer.

For instance, a man in the modern world who belonged naturally to this class in a pre-eminent degree was Walt Whitman. Critics fuss themselves for ever about whether he was a poet or a prose writer. As a matter of fact, he was neither a poet nor a prose writer; he was a sayer of great things.

He excelled in a sort of primeval epigram, "I do not give lectures or a little charity; when I give I give myself." "Do we find life so well provided for and think that death is not equally well provided for?" These have the characteristics of the logia on which were founded the larger faiths of mankind. And Whitman would have much preferred to have shouted them in the streets, like John the Baptist or Mahomet, to being obliged to include them in what he was obliged to call poems.

George Macdonald was in the same way not a born writer; he was a born maker of spontaneous texts. He also would have very much preferred to walk about the streets of some Greek or Eastern village with a long white beard, simply saying what he had to say. But just as Whitman had to label his tracts of truth poetry, Macdonald labelled his novels. There are some exceptions, which we may notice in a moment, but in the main it is true to say that we only remember his novels, as we only remember Whitman's poetry, by certain bursts of an astonishing sagacity often uttered in five words. Anyone who has read Macdonald's novels will remember a sort of celestial wit in some of the dialogues, retorts that seem really like thunderbolts from heaven, such as some of Robert Falconer's answers to those who inquire about his methods or some of the mystical flippancies of the North Wind, or the perfect reply of Mr. Cupples, in *Alec Forbes*, to the man who objected to his carrying a foxglove on the Lord's Day. "It angert me sae to see the illfaured thing growin' there on the Lord's Day, that I maist pulled it up by the root."

Macdonald was not so much a man of letters, then, as a man with something to say. But, unfortunately for him—or, rather, unfortunately for us—the thing that he had to say was something not easily understood in this particular time. He was what is called a Celt and what is called a mystic. But nobody could conceivably have been more different from the Celtic mystics of to-day. First of all, of course, some of the modern Celts profess to have abandoned the moral battle, the old antithesis of sin and judgment, in favour of something that is positively sadder than war itself, a beauty more dismal than ugliness. They are all agreed that devils are not so black as they are painted; they never ask if devils are so blue as they are painted. Macdonald was a mystic who was half mad with joy, of a joy all the more violent because it remained mystical. For him the secret of the Cosmos was a secret because it was too good to tell. The stars and all things in his world tingled with the tension of that painful pleasure of the soul. For him the pity of God was so positive as to be a definite passion like thirst; it was a fierce tenderness; he was never tired of saying that his God was a consuming fire.

But there was another respect in which he differed from what we call a Mystic and what we call a Celt. The school of Mr. W.B. Yeats tends always to talk of twilight, that is, of the mixed and vague thing, of the thing that is almost something else. True Mysticism will have nothing to do with vague-

ness. True Mysticism will have nothing to do with twilight. True Mysticism is entirely concerned with absolute things; not with twilight, but with the sacred black darkness and the sacred white sun. For to all good Mystics, from Plato downwards, absolute ideas like those of light and darkness, are the real and interesting things. It must always be remembered that the only person in the world who can be really exact and definite is the Mystic. All sane materialism is avowedly agnostic and relative. The Evolutionist cannot be precise. The Positivist cannot be positive. But the Mystic believes that a rose is red with a fixed and sacred redness, and that a cucumber is green by a thundering decree of Heaven. Hence in all the great Christian Mystics, in St. Francis, in Vaughan, in Macdonald, there is a brightness of colour that might satisfy a negro. Actuality is the keynote of Mysticism. And this great man has now gone deeper into a world of dreadful actuality, of a deepening and dreadful joy.