

George Macdonald

FOUR years ago, Mr. C. S. Lewis, M.A., the author of *The Allegory of Love* and *A Preface to Paradise Lost* but known to a wider public by his religious writings and his broadcasts, published *George MacDonald. An Anthology* (Bles, 5s.). This book, with its introduction and its ample selections from an almost forgotten writer, must have been a revelation to many; the discovery of a profound religious thinker and teacher of a bygone generation, but whose words are of enduring wisdom and spiritual value. Some readers of Mr. Lewis' books will have recognised the dependence, but others will be impressed by the confession: "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," and he proceeds to a great tribute to his acknowledged teacher. It seems worth-while to give some account of one, whose books have been treasured for many years by the present writer, as a fuller note to Mr. Lewis's choice and valuable anthology.

George Macdonald's grandparents were Charles Edward Macdonald and Isabella Robertson. His grandfather was born just before the Battle of Culloden in 1746, and was named after the Young Pretender. After the final defeat the family, which was descended from fugitives from the massacre of Glencoe, hid for months in caves on the coast. His grandmother was of a family whose religion was stern even for that stern time. She was allowed to learn to read, but not to write, "for fear she would be writing to the lads." She was the original of Mrs. Falconer in her grandson's great novel *Robert Falconer*. She and her husband attended the Parish Church at Huntly. The parish, on account of its religious condition, was known as "the Dead Sea." The edifice itself, dirty and falling into disrepair through neglect, was a fit symbol of the spiritual state of the parish. And though her husband remained a member of the Establishment to his death, his strong-minded wife took the family to the "Mission Kirk," a Congregational Church, whose minister, George Cowie, had been expelled from the Presbyterians because of his evangelical sympathies.

There is no doubt that her religion was austere. When her

husband died in 1819 she burnt his fiddle to prevent her sons from using the ungodly instrument; an incident which reappears in *Robert Falconer*. But the portrait of her in this book, some known facts of her life, and the deep affection she won, contradict Mr. Lewis' description of her as "a truly terrible old woman." Probably he is repelled by the narrowness and harshness of her creed although her grandson saw past it, and loved what he saw. The beautiful story of the saving of Shargar in the book is more than paralleled by the fact that Mrs. Macdonald took charge of the family of a beggar-woman to save them from physical and moral ruin. Her daughter-in-law (George Macdonald's mother) once wrote to her: "If I know my own heart I think I can say that, nearest to my own mother, there is not another I love and esteem more than my second mother—for you have been a mother to me ever since I came with you."¹ God satisfied the family with much honey out of the rock, or what seemed so to unseeing eyes. Shortly before her death in 1848 she said to her eldest son, William: "Laddie, the papers say that amon' a' the changes takin' place i' the warld, they haave gotten a gweed Pope a' Rome, and I ha' been prayin' to the Lord a' nicht that he wud gie him a new heart an' a gweed wife."

Her son, George, was a member of the Huntly Mission Kirk, and the character of David Elginbrod in the novel of that name is drawn from him. David's famous prayers, the loveliest passages in the book, are modelled on the memory of his in phrase and spirit. He was a very remarkable man and the tributes his son paid to him do not measure the full extent of his influence. In the Dedication of his second poem, *A Hidden Life*, to him the son says:

All childhood, reverence clothed thee, undefined,
As for some being of another race;
Ah, not with it, departing—growing apace
As years did bring me manhood's loftier mind,
Able to see thy human life behind—
The same hid heart, the same revealing face—
My own dim contest settling into grace,
Of sorrow, strife, and victory combined.

And in *The Diary of an old Soul* he wrote as late as 1880.

Whole-hearted is my worship of the man
From whom my earthly history began.

In 1822 he married Helen MacKay who wrote the letter quoted above. She died in 1832, leaving him with five boys—Charles, George (then eight years old), James who died at eight, Alexander,

¹ *George Macdonald and his Wife*, by Dr. Greville Macdonald, p. 32 (*The Life*).

and John Hill. The last was the original of Eric Ericson and author of the striking poems included in *Robert Falconer*. In 1839 he married Margaret McColl the daughter of an Episcopalian clergyman, by whom he had three daughters: Isabella, who died of tuberculosis at fourteen, Louisa, and Jane. She proved a devoted mother to the boys. The father died in 1858, aged sixty-six, having been preceded by two sons, Alexander (twenty-five) and John Hill (twenty-eight). Margaret, his widow, lived until 1910, dying in her 102nd year.

George Macdonald was born at Huntley in 1824, and the district is made the scene of some of his earlier novels. It is the background of *Ronald Bannerman's Schooldays*; and *Alec Forbes*, one of his greatest books, contains memorable portraits of some of its people. In childhood he was very delicate and a great reader, but his strength grew as he grew older, and in 1840, winning a bursary of £15 a year, he entered the King's College, Aberdeen. In 1845 he left with the M.A. degree. While he was there he spent some months cataloguing the library of a great house in the North of Scotland and, on leaving, he found employment as a tutor in London. There is little doubt that this period, though little is known of it, was a formative era in his life. It was then most probably that he became acquainted with the great mystics, from Boehme to Law, with Novalis and other German writers; and finally escaped from the Calvinism in which he was reared. His thoughts almost inevitably turned to the Christian ministry. His father tried to dissuade him and pointed out the bleak prospects of a Congregational minister. Possibly he foresaw that his son would find special difficulty in that vocation. But he was not to be discouraged, and in 1848 he entered the Congregational College at Highbury. As a Master of Arts his course was shortened to two years. In the following year the College was moved to Belsize Park and became the New College. It was from here that, in 1850, when Macdonald was leaving, Hale White ("Mark Rutherford") and two other students were expelled for denying "Verbal Inspiration." Macdonald evidently did not come under this ban, his spiritual interests being in another direction. In that year he received a "Call" to the ministry of the small Congregational Church at Arundel, Sussex; and in March 1851, he married Louisa Powell at the Old Gravel Pits Congregational Church, Hackney, the happiest of unions.

He was minister of this church for only three years. Strong exception was taken to his teaching by an important section of his congregation, and in May 1853, he resigned. Mr. Lewis says that the charges were that "he had expressed belief in a future state of probation for heathens, and that he was tainted with German theology." Robertson Nicoll says that "he puzzled

a simple-minded congregation with his mystical sermons." ² There may be some truth in this, but the fact that he had the loyal support of the poorer members of the church suggests that these explanations are, at least, inadequate. More revealing is the comment of his wife on the death of Robertson of Brighton in the same year. She had gone to her family in London, and wrote to her husband: "He has been hunted to death for his liberality and goodness. Is it not fearful to think of the *piety* of the churches?" ³ Macdonald, however, left Arundel without any rancour on either side.

While still there he became a contributor to various periodicals such as *The Eclectic Review* and *The Christian Spectator* (the last a monthly of great religious and literary quality and interest). In 1853 he wrote an able review of Browning's *Christmas Eve* which, many years later, was included in the collection of articles and sermons called *A Dish of Orts* (1893). And at Arundel in 1851 he wrote his first book *Within and Without. A Dramatic Poem*, though it did not find a publisher until 1855, a few months before T. T. Lynch issued *The Rivulet. A Contribution to Sacred Song*, which occasioned much wild and foolish controversy. *Within and Without* is a work of genius. It is often imperfect in form as is most of Macdonald's poetry, but the winds of poetry blow through it, and its spiritual intensity is felt in almost every line. It contains some charming lyrics such as:—

My child is lying on my knees;
The signs of heaven she reads;
My face is all the heaven she sees,
Is all the heaven she needs.

and

Love me, beloved; the thick clouds lower;
A sleepiness filleth the earth and air.

As these particular songs were written originally for his wife, it is understandable that she parted with them with "a real touch of heartbreak." ⁴

The poem at once won the attention of many who became his friends, including Tennyson and Lady-Byron. Its drama is a romantic story of parted lovers which Macdonald makes the vehicle of a soul's quest for God. The following passage is quoted for its bearing on his teaching at Arundel:—

I sought my God; I pressed importunate;
I spoke to him, I cried, and in my heart
It seemed he answered me. I said, "Oh! take
Me nigh to thee, thou mighty life of life!

² *Daybook of Claudius Clear*, p. 336.

³ *Life*, p. 203.

⁴ *Life* p. 224.

I faint, I die; I am a child alone
 'Mid the wild storm, the brooding desert-night."
 "Go thou, poor child, to him who once, like thee
 Trod the highways and deserts of the world."
 "Thou sendest me away then, wretched, from thy sight!
 Thou wilt not have me—I am not worth thy care!"
 "I send thee not away, child, think not so;
 From the cloud resting on the mountain peak,
 I call to guide thee in the path by which
 Thou mayst come soonest home unto my heart.
 I, I am leading thee. Think not of him
 As he were one and I were one; in him
 Thou wilt find me, for he and I are one.
 Learn thou to worship at his lowly shrine
 And see that God dwelleth in lowliness."

I came to Him; I gazed upon his face;
 And, lo! from out of his eyes God looked on me!
 Lord of thyself and me through the sore grief
 Which thou didst bear to bring me back to God,
 Or rather, bear in being unto us
 Thy own pure shining self of love and truth!
 When I have learned to think thy radiant thoughts,
 To love the truth beyond the power to know it,
 To bear my light as thou thy heavy cross,
 Nor ever feel a martyr for thy sake,
 But an unprofitable servant still,
 My highest sacrifice my simplest duty
 Imperative and unavoidable,
 Less than which *all*, were nothingness and waste;
 When I have lost myself in other men,
 And found myself in thee—the Father then
 Will come with thee, and will abide with me.⁵

The whole of Macdonald's own life and abandonment to Christ in complete surrender to His will is in those closing words.

The passage, though far from being the best, indicates the spirit and teaching of the poem. And it contains in substance or in suggestion, what must have been his teaching at Arundel; and was till the end of his life the soul of all he said and wrote. Its religious centre was the Fatherhood of God and not the so-called "plan of salvation" which was the common theme of Evangelical preaching. Robertson Nicoll allows that "in a sense it is true that he preached the love of God to a generation that needed it."⁶ John Foster, the great Baptist essayist, had, in *On the Aversion of Men of Taste to Evangelical Religion* long before (1805) uttered a grave warning against the "accustomed diction of evangelical religion":—

"It gives the gospel the air of a professional thing, which must have its peculiar cast of phrases, for the mutual recognition of its proficients, in

⁵ Part iii, sec. x.

⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 349.

the same manner as other professions, arts, crafts, and mysteries have theirs . . . It is giving an uncouthness of mien to a beauty which should attract all hearts. It is teaching a provincial dialect to the rising instructor of a world. It is imposing the guise of a cramped formal ecclesiastic on what is destined for an universal monarch."

The warning was unheeded, and by Macdonald's time the gospel had become bound up with a narrow system of phrase and dogma in which the amplitude of the love of God was lost. Consciously or not, Macdonald had returned to an older and nobler tradition. He was not, of course, the only one. We have but to recall such names as Erskine of Linlathen, Robertson of Brighton, Maurice, Kingsley, John Pulsford, F. W. Farquhar, Dr. S. Cox, E. H. Hull, and others, not to mention Tennyson and Browning, to recognise his shining company. And these followed an older band which included Whichcote, and Smith, and Cudworth (whose great sermon before the House of Commons on 31st March, 1647 is of the very spirit of Macdonald), John Norris, and William Law. And beyond them a great company of saints and mystics and poets innumerable.

He took his stand on the divine words: "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." The centre of all his thinking and his faith was the Incarnation of God in Christ; and *Within and Without* tells of his own pilgrimage to His feet. "I know of no other way of knowing that there is a God" one of his characters says in *Thomas Wingfold*, "but that which reveals *what* he is—the only idea that could be God—shows him in his own self-proving existence—and that way is Jesus Christ as he revealed himself on earth, and as he is revealed afresh to every heart that seeks to know the truth concerning him"⁷ Macdonald had seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and the light had shone out of darkness into his own heart to illumine it forever.

It was the glory of the holy love of God. But that holy love was a consuming fire. It was "easy to please, but hard to satisfy," for nothing could satisfy it but the complete destruction of sin in every soul. There is no conflict between justice and mercy because it would not be merciful to leave a man still a sinner. At any cost to Himself or the man sin must be burned away. "Christ died to save us, not from suffering, but from ourselves; not from injustice, far less from justice, but from being unjust. He died that we might live—live as He lives, by dying as He died who died to Himself."⁸ It was for this that "He cast Himself into the eternal gulf yawning between the children and the Father."⁹ "Love is the final atonement, of which

⁷ p. 88.

⁸ *Unspoken Sermons*. Third Series, p. 96.

⁹ *Ib.*, p. 157.

and for which the sacrifice of the atonement was made," he says in another place, "And till this atonement is made in every man, sin holds its own, and God is not all in all."¹⁰ Salvation is a costly thing to God and to the redeemed; but the inexorable Love will not be content with less than a whole redemption.

It could not be said that all evangelical preachers ignored the gospels, though the "plan of salvation" tended to obscure their importance. Macdonald's biographer says: "My aunt Angela remembered one ministerial guest declaring a propos of the Atonement, that if Jesus Christ had been born one day and crucified the next, his work for the world would have been accomplished."¹¹ Probably few would have expressed themselves so crudely, yet was it not implied in the current doctrine of the redeeming work of Christ? There was no vital connection between the words, the works, and the fierce oppositions of the Ministry of Jesus, and the Cross. They had nothing to do with redemption. In one of his books Macdonald tells a true story of a young preacher who was rebuked by an old lady for "preaching works"; and, on his pleading the Sermon on the Mount, was answered: "Ay, but He was a varra yoong man when He preacht that sermon."¹² But the ministry was not a mere interlude, essentially irrelevant, to the saving work of Christ; nor was His teaching discontinuous with His sacrifice for men or His living Presence. He came to reconcile sinful men to the Father; and that meant to bring the forgiveness of sins and to reveal the mind of the Father to which they must conform. There is no true reconciliation with God which is not reconciliation to the will of God. To be saved is to be brought into obedience, to cease to be a prodigal and to become a loyal child in the Father's house. It is to be in the Kingdom of God. And, as in His ministry of love and His Passion Christ manifested the forgiveness of the Father, so in His teaching He revealed the mind of the Father to which the children must be faithful. "Be ye perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect." That this might involve persecution, that it did mean war with the spirit of the world within us and without, Christ made abundantly clear. "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." This suffering and death to self were not the mere accompaniments of salvation, they were salvation, for salvation is conformity to the Will of God as Christ revealed it, and it is through "much tribulation" that we must all enter the Kingdom. Macdonald wrote in *Within and Without*:

¹⁰ *Alec Forbes*, p. 269.

¹¹ *Life*, p. 193.

¹² *What's Mine's Mine*, p. 61.

Go thou into thy closet; shut thy door;
 And pray to Him in secret: He will hear.
 But think not thou, by one wild bound, to clear
 The numberless ascensions, more and more,
 Of starry stairs that must be climbed, before
 Thou comest to the Father's likeness near.

And in his many books, which are all expositions of the way of Christ, Macdonald expounded the gospels.

It was said that at Arundel Macdonald had expressed his belief in a future probation "for the heathen." It must be doubted if at that time he had reached his conviction of the ultimate salvation of all men which the popular mind specially associated with him. It does not occur in *Within and Without* or in his earliest work. It may be implied in all, but except in his *Unspoken Sermons* (1867-1889) it is astonishing how little it finds direct expression in the main body of his writing. It is never emphasised, and was not the subject of any of his books. But it was part of his faith. G. K. Chesterton has a characteristic mention of it in his reference to Macdonald. He associates him with Stopford Brooke as a teacher of an "optimistic theism." He says "It was a full and substantial faith in the Fatherhood of God, and little could be said against it, even in theological theory, except that it rather ignored the free-will of man. Its Universalism was a sort of optimistic Calvinism."¹³ As so often, Chesterton was genially inaccurate. Macdonald had, doctrinally, nothing in common with Stopford Brooke who was a Unitarian. And his universalism was not a "sort of optimistic Calvinism," which might, perhaps, be said of Thomas Erskine who avowed his preference of Calvinism to Arminianism. But Macdonald discarded Calvinism in every form, and stressed free-will to the point of pain. For stringent analysis of sin and severity of judgment no writer excels him. Like Meredith's *The Egoist*, his books compel their readers to search their own hearts. They convict of sin. We know that he loathed sin because of the loathing he excites in us. He arouses fear—and even despair. "There can be no such agony for created soul, as to see itself vile—vile by its own action and choice." No one can read, without a shudder, the chapter "The Final Unmasking" in *Unspoken Sermons*.¹⁴ The freedom of the will is a datum for Macdonald. For God to coerce man would be to deny Himself, and to fail of his purpose in His creation. Man must be made to condemn himself. "He flattereth himself in his own eyes until his iniquity is found to be hateful" (Ps. xxxvi. 2, A.V.). And, through whatever suffering and unveiling, the Inexorable Love

¹³ *Autobiography*, p. 172.

¹⁴ *Unspoken Sermons*, Third Series.

of God will eventually destroy every refuge a man seeks from the truth. Repentance is the only way left; and Macdonald believed that every man would come, early or at long last, to repentance. This is far from an "optimistic Calvinism." It is an heroic faith; but Macdonald was a man of unusually heroic faith; and perhaps only those of a like heroic faith have a right to dispute with him.

Macdonald did not, as Mr. Lewis suggests, immediately abandon the ministry. Leaving his wife with her friends in London, he went to Manchester. There he became intimate with A. J. Scott, Principal of Owens College; who had been expelled from the Church of Scotland in 1831, along with MacLeod Campbell, and Scott introduced him to others. He soon gathered round him a company of worshippers in Renshaw Street, and about the same time he accepted a Call to a working class church in Bolton. He continued to write to the journals, and did some lecturing. But his health was always precarious. Immediately before going to Arundel he had a severe haemorrhage, and soon after coming to Manchester he had another with congestion of the lungs. He was also desperately poor. But he was a man of powerful will and faith in God.

Health, my means to live—
All things seem rushing straight into the dark.
But the dark still is God.¹⁵

His wife said long afterwards, "we hung on by our eyelashes, or rather I hung on by his."¹⁶ But help was forthcoming. Among the admirers of his work, and especially of *Within and Without*, was Lady Byron, and it was chiefly through her generosity that he was enabled to resign his work in Manchester and Bolton; and in 1856 he went to Algiers. It was with great grief that the poor church at Bolton parted with him. They offered to keep the position open until his return!

Among the friends Macdonald had made was Frederick Denison Maurice, who in 1858, recommended *Phantastes; a Faerie Romance* (first edition added "for men and women") to Smith, Elder & Co, and it was published. This was his first prose work. Mary Coleridge has called it "the most exquisite fairy-tale that ever was written,"¹⁷—she surely had forgotten *Undine*; and Mr. Lewis says that it was to him "what the first sight of Beatrice had been to Dante; *Here begins the New Life.*"¹⁸ It is the story of the soul's escape from materialism,

¹⁵ *Diary of an Old Soul.*

¹⁶ *Life*, p. 468.

¹⁷ *Non Sequitur*, p. 80.

¹⁸ *The Great Divorce*, p. 60.

false romance, and the self, "the shadow," into the true life, via the "good" death. "I learned that it is better, a thousand-fold, for a proud man to fall and be humbled, than to hold up his head in his pride and fancied innocence. I learned that he that will be a hero, will barely be a man; and he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood." The book is very beautiful and contains same lovely lyrics notably:—

Alas, how easily things go wrong!
 A sigh too much, or a kiss too long
 And there follows a mist and a weeping rain,
 And life is never the same again.

But it was not until he wrote *David Elginbrod* (1862) that Macdonald won the ear of the public. In Mrs. Oliphant's *Life* it is told how she, after reading the Ms., urgently recommended Hurst & Blackett to publish it as "a work of genius." It more than justified her and established his fame. David the Scotch peasant dies early in the book, but like Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play, his figure dominates it to the end. His prayers became famous. At a Memorial Service after Macdonald's death,¹⁹ Dr. Clifford read the following and said: "I know nothing finer than that in the English language":—

"O thou, wha keeps the stars alicht, an' our souls burnin' wi' a licht aboon that o' the stars, grant that they may shine afore thee as the stars for ever and ever. An' as thou hauds the stars burnin' a' the nicht, when there's no man to see, so haud thou the licht burnin' in our souls, when we see neither thee nor it, but are buried in the grave o' sleep and' forgetfulness. Be thou by us, even as a mother sits by the bedside o' her aillin' wean a' the lang nicht; only be thou nearer to us, even in our verra souls, an' watch ower the warl' o' dreams that they mak' for themselves. Grant that more an' more thochts o' thy thinkin' may come into our herts day by day, till there shall be an open road atween thee an' us, an' thy angels may ascend and descend upon us, so that we may be in thy heaven, e'en while we are upo' thy earth: Amen."

This book Macdonald dedicated to Lady Byron "with a love stronger than death."

In *David Elginbrod* there is a long passage written in defence of the teaching of F. D. Maurice who is the unnamed preacher of whom it is said: "I always feel I am in the presence of one of the holy servants of God's great temple not made with hands. I heartily trust that man. He is what he seems to be."²⁰ Macdonald and his family were now worshipping at his church at Vere Street, London; and in 1860 he became a lay member of the Church of England. Doubtless the influence of Maurice counted for much, but he believed he would find greater freedom

¹⁹ *Life*, p. 234.

²⁰ p. 332ff.

in that Communion. His experience at Arundel had not been happy, and others besides himself felt the atmosphere of the Nonconformity of that time uncongenial. There was too much justification for the criticisms of Matthew Arnold. Mrs. Oliphant in her master-piece *Salem Chapel*, and Mark Rutherford in the *Autobiography* and *Revolution in Tanner's Lane* presented an unattractive picture of its church life. This was not the whole truth, as Macdonald knew well, and as he proved by his continuing to preach, as health and opportunity served, in Nonconformist Churches. As time went on he gained increasing welcome in them, much to the irritation of Dean Plumtre and other Anglican friends. But Macdonald was not the man, nor his mind the type, to be troubled by ecclesiastical distinctions. Shortly before joining it he said: "I count the Church as much a sect as the Independents";²¹ and writing later—"I am a member of the Church of England, but care nothing for that or any other denomination as dividing or separating."²² He belonged, and rejoiced to belong, to the whole Church of God. Of his preaching we are fortunate in having an account by Bishop Phillips Brooks: "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!"²³ It is the same with all that he wrote. He is, as Mr. Lewis says, "a supreme preacher." He is humble and absorbed in his message. "The best of men" he wrote, "is unworthy to loose the latchet of His shoe, yet the servant must be as his Master. Ah me! while I write it, I remember that the sinful woman might yet do as she pleased with His sacred feet. Desert may not touch His shoe-tie: Love may kiss His feet."²⁴ His health was always uncertain and he had a large family. He told Mrs. Cox, of Bluntisham, who knew him well, that he had "one less than the perfect number," i.e. eleven. Sometimes the family was on the very edge of destitution. But his trust in God was indomitable, and help came when it was most needed. It is important to realise that the reiterated teaching of his books came out of his own experience. Once when he and his were on the brink of starvation he was delivered by an unexpected legacy. He tells of it in *The Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*: "In the morning his wife gave him a letter which their common trouble had made her forget, and which had lain with its black border all night in the darkness unopened, waiting to tell him

²¹ *Life*, p. 269.

²² *Ib.*, p. 367.

²³ *Lectures on Preaching*, p. 16

²⁴ *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, p. 234.

how the vanished friend had not forgotten him on her death-bed, but had left him enough to take him out of all his difficulties, and give him strength and time to do far better work than the book that had failed of birth. Some of my readers may doubt whether I am more than a 'wandering voice,' but whatever I am, or may be thought to be, my friend's story is true."²⁵ This is autobiography, for in his extremity a legacy of £300 from Lady Byron arrived. Other legacies helped him. Crabbe Robinson left him £300; and Russell Gurney, £500. In 1887, it is said at the request of the Queen, he was placed on the Civil List for a pension of £100. It was mainly by contributions from admirers that, when his health compelled him to live much out of England, he was able to build the villa "Casa Corregio," in Bordighera, Italy. It was there that Mrs. Cox saw him and his family acting his own dramatised version of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, Macdonald labouring under his heavy burden as *Christian*.

And yet, with all his ill-health, his industry and production were prodigious. He preached and lectured so long as he was able. His lecture-tour in the United States, during which Phillips Brooks heard him, had to be curtailed owing to a serious breakdown. He wrote numberless articles, published volumes of sermons, and a fine study of *Hamlet*. His collected poems fill two volumes. He wrote nearly forty novels; and made a great and lasting reputation with his *Fairy Tales*. These were in every way unique in that, while generations of children loved them, they were not primarily written for children. "I do not write for children" he said, "but for the childlike, whether of five or fifty, or seventy-five."²⁶ While interesting as tales, they are semi-allegorical, parabolic, suggestive of meanings beyond. Mr. Lewis describes his art as "mythopoeic," and says "this, in my opinion, he does better than any man." *Phantastes* may be regarded as the first of them; but the "children's books" are *The Back of the North Wind*, the "Curdie" books (*The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*), and the Collected short *Fairy Tales*. The Curdie books have been reprinted during the last year by two publishers. *The Back of the North Wind* contains the famous and exquisite "Where did you come from, baby dear?" G. K. Chesterton²⁷ says of *The Princess and the Goblin*, "I for one can really testify to a book that has made a difference to my whole existence, which has helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed." A later book,

²⁵ *Ib.*, p. 376.

²⁶ *A Dish of Orts*, p. 317.

²⁷ Introduction to the *Life*.

obviously written for children of older growth, was *Lilith*. All these books contain, in their mythopoeic form, Macdonald's religious teaching.

Attempts have been made from time to time to trace in them the influence of William Blake. But those who are familiar with both scarcely needed the assurance of his son that Macdonald had but the slightest acquaintance with Blake. Their teaching on God, Man, and Nature, are fundamentally different. Blake was almost a pure mystic and visionary, the greatest in our literature. Macdonald was not a mystic except in so far as a "mystical" element enters into Christian experience, and religion and poetry have in them what goes beyond words.

The two volumes of his collected poems contain much that is very beautiful. Some of them, like "They all were looking for a king" have found their way into hymn-books, and others like "When thou turn'st away ill" make a direct appeal to Christian experience. Many have the simplicity of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, and many are but impromptu verses. Macdonald was, however, a very bad reviser. Not only did he include much that was not worth preserving as poetry, but he corrected his poems, smoothing out the lines, sometimes re-writing the whole, and generally destroying the vigour and life of the original. Although he wrote some poems that will probably live, it is beyond question that there is far more poetic thought and diffused poetry in his great prose works than in the collected poems. Their appeal, however, as religious verse is another matter.

The main work of Macdonald is in the long series of his novels. Of these his best is to be found in *David Elginbrod*, *Alec Forbes*, and *Robert Falconer*. They are richest in autobiography, in characters, in incidents, and as stories. *Robert Falconer* contains his fullest teaching. A sentence from it sums it all up: "The Lord's easy pleased, but hard to satisfy"; and it is repeated in other books. There are few pages that are without some "winged word" or memorable sentence or passage, which falls into the mind like seed to germinate and increase there. To these books may be added *Sir Gibbie*, though *Gibbie* himself has surely come out of some Christian fairy-land. But though these books are his "best," none of the long list is unworthy of them. The interest may vary from one to another but the spiritual quality never varies. The spirit of holiness breathes through them all. As Robertson Nicoll wrote: "No one could lay them down without thrilling to the thought that truth and goodness and God are alone worth living for. They are books of the true prophetic quality, and ought not to be forgotten."²⁸ This applies to the "dullest" of them. In truth, it is only in form

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 345.

that his books are novels. George Macdonald was pre-eminently a spiritual genius and religious teacher, and it is as such that his readers have always revered him and his works.

His closing years were clouded by great sorrows. In 1878 his daughter, Mary Josephine, died aged twenty-five; his youngest son, Maurice, died at fifteen in 1879. In 1884 Caroline Grace died at thirty, and in 1891, the greatest blow of all, Lilian Scott, the mainstay of her mother, died at thirty-nine. All died of tuberculosis. His wife's reason gave way under these blows, and she died in 1902. It was in these years that Macdonald wrote his *Diary of an Old Soul*. It was printed at first for private circulation only. It is not a book to criticise. It is the record in verse, sometimes halting, of his aspirations, his prayers, his confessions, his struggle for Christlikeness, his sorrows, and his tears for his lost children, his unfaltering faith, and his unshaken hope of Immortality. It can only be read humbly, and as a devotional treasure.

The last five years of his life were years of a strange silence. In addition to his bronchial troubles, he had suffered for many years from a torturing eczema. Suddenly this disappeared and with it his power of speech. A mist seemed to gather round his mind. He accepted gratefully and gently the loving service of those about him. When told of his wife's death he wept. His son writes: "He spent much of his time in bed, but he was always waiting, always beautiful to behold, in spite of the cloud upon the snow-clad mountain. If anyone came to the door for entry, he would turn and look, and then seeing it was not my mother would sigh deeply, and begin his waiting again."²⁹ He had written in the *Diary*

Stumbling through the night,
To my dim lattice, O calling Christ! I go,
And out into the dark look for thy star-crowned head.

The long-lingering twilight darkened at last to night; and the stars came out; and he was with his beloved and his Lord. He died at Ashstead, Surrey, on 18 September, 1905.

B. G. COLLINS.

²⁹ *Life*, p. 562.