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## At the Back of the North Wind: George MacDonald: A Centennial Appreciation

### Abstract

A brief overview of MacDonald's life and writing, with a particular focus on *At the Back of the North Wind*.

### Additional Keywords

MacDonald, George—Influence on fantasy

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# At the Back of the North Wind: George MacDonald: A Centennial Appreciation

By Glenn E. Sadler



Author of twenty-five novels, three adult prose fantasies, poems like "Baby" ("Where did you come from, baby dear?"), and children's classics, *The Princess and the Goblin* and *At the Back of the North Wind*, George MacDonald (1824-1905) is not only C. S. Lewis's chief mentor but Scotland's master of myth-makers as well. In his *Castle of Imagination* lived, for instance, the voluptuous, cruelest mother of all, Lilith, Adam's rebellious first wife. He believed in ghosts and Second Sight.

North Wind and George MacDonald were inseparable. "I have often tried how far back my memory could go," wrote MacDonald, in 1872, in his autobiographical novel *Wilfrid Cumbermede*. "I suggest there are awfully ancient shadows mingling with our memories; but, as far as I can judge, the earliest definite memory I have is the discovery of how the wind is made; for I saw the process going on before my very eyes. . ."

Seated on the broad sill of his dormer window, Wilfrid saw, from his boyhood watch-tower fortress, North Wind at work. There could be no mistake about the relationship of cause and effect. The trees churning in the distance and the swinging of the clock-pendulum caused the storm: great gusts came faster and faster, and grew into a steady gale. As the pendulum went on swinging--to and fro--the gale increased in violence. "I sat half in terror, half in delight, at the awful success of my experiment." Thus began George MacDonald's lifelong ride, over castles of granite, with Mistress North Wind to her icy blue cave.

#### HEWN FROM GRANITE

There is a sense in which one's childhood is inescapable. No matter how hard one may try to improve upon it or abolish memories of those early years, they continue to lurk, like last month's calendar, hanging glaringly on the inner wall. A popular literary theory claims that writers, particularly creators

of fairytales, seed their imagination most with vivid--and not always pleasant--recollections of the family circle. This is especially true, I think, of Scottish writers, for whom kith and kin means something more than simply relatives.

"Surely it is one of the worst signs of a man," insisted MacDonald, "to turn his back upon the rock whence he was hewn." With national loyalty as his touchstone, MacDonald went on to become, in the 1870's, chieftain of nineteenth-century Fairyland.

Born on December 10th, 1824, in the stone-built house on Duke and Church Streets, next to his grandmother's, George MacDonald, the second of four sons, carved out, early in his boyhood, a special niche for Huntly, "The Little Grey Town" (as he called it) in his library of memories. From its bustling Square, menacing Norman castle--encircled by the Bogie and Deveron Rivers--its crop-anxious townfolk, Missioner Kirk and jolly Boar's Head [Gordon Arms], MacDonald mirrored, literally, its clannish world of plain living, "tawse and pleurisy," in two of his best Scottish novels, *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865) and *Robert Falconer* (1868).

A rugged life which had as its main sources of community excitement, floods and funerals and anniversary processions of children up to the Lodge, next to the Castle, to give "her Grace a cake and an orange each." Local inhabitants of Huntly found themselves transformed, without knowing it, into fictional characters overnight. Names were changed, of course, in order to protect the innocent as well as the guilty: for example the brutal schoolmaster Murdoch Malison [Colin Stewart] who beat MacDonald's brother Charles into a "dead faint," when he was yet under nine years of age, an episode (sadistic schoolmasters are popular fellows in most Scottish fiction) which takes place in *Alec Forbes*. Cannily MacDonald continued to intermingle reality and fantasy in his novels and fairytales, throughout his prolific literary career, in which he produced over fifty

works in forty-two years and developed a genius for myth-making which has few modern rivals.

#### CASTLE-BUILDING AND DEATH'S STAIR

MacDonald's favorite boyhood pastime was castle-building; his closest friends were, in fact, horses and dreams. At two years of age, young George moved with his family, and that of his uncle James, to Upper Pirriesmill, The Farm, "Howglen" or, as it was known then, Bleachfield Cottage. He spent summer days riding his white mare "Missy," for which he claimed Arabian blood, to Fortsoy or Banff to visit his pretty cousin Helen and Uncle George MacKay whose love of the sea stirred up the dream-riden lad's desire to become a sailor. Investigating the gloomy caves along the Moray Firth, near the quaint fishing village of Gardenstown, a place alive with tales of pirates, lost sailors and hidden treasure, was his secret delight. All of which he put, in 1855, at age thirty-two, into "A Story of the Sea-Shore," a narrative poem surging with sea-Death, expectation of marital fulfilment, and dark omens.

"My days pass so quietly--I hardly go anywhere but saunter about the house with Shakespeare in my hand or pocket," wrote MacDonald to his wife, in the summer of 1855 during a restful holiday at Huntly. "If you had been here after I wrote to you last night, you might have seen me in less than an hour on the far horizon--the top of a hill [Clashmach] nearly 1,000 feet high 2½ miles off. You would have seen my white mare and myself clear against the sky. . ."

And again, on July 20th (1855), he wrote: "I have been out since twelve o'clock, have had 18 miles on horseback, and some delightful feelings floating into me from the face of the blue hills, and profusion of wild roses on some parts of the road. The heather is just beginning to break out in purple on the hillsides. Another week of sunshine will enpurple some from base to summit. How much more I understand nature than I did! . . ." This typically Scottish scene he put into his verse-parable, "The Hills":

For I am always climbing hills,  
And ever passing on,  
Hoping on some high mountain peak  
To find my Father's throne. . . .

But for the newly married Wordsworthian bard this refreshing summer jaunt--man and horse against the sky--to the Cabrach and Moray coast, ended in sorrow; on August 24th (1855) his sister Bella died, and MacDonald was forced to face again the grim reality of descending "death's lonely stair."

Death, its sombre actuality, entered prematurely into George MacDonald's childhood world of "kirk and dreams": his mother Helen MacKay died when he was only eight, thus starting the long procession of funerals throughout his life.

MacDonald took as his major literary theme the stifling experience of dying; some of the greatest moments in his novels are death-bed scenes. With moving simplicity, void of sentimental froth, he describes in another of his Scots novels, *Malcolm* (1875)--the instalments of which the townsfolk of Cullen reportedly rushed--the confessional death of the Marquis of Lossie. Lady Florimel, rushing into her father's arms, cries: "'Papa! papa!' laying her cheek to his. And with 'shining tearful eyes' the marquis murmurs: 'Flory! . . . I'm going away. I'm going--I've got--to make an apology. Malcolm, be good--'" But the curious "apology" is never made and in the sequel to *Malcolm*, *The Marquis of Lossie* (1877) the mysterious tale of illegitimate birth is unravelled. As a novelist, MacDonald saw minutely into life's actualities (his characters are never forced to be good), and as a myth-maker, in *Phantastes* and *Lilith* and his fairytales, he detected something more, a golden moment which held him, and his readers, to the end.

#### AT THE BACK OF THE NORTH WIND

Most famous of MacDonald's fairytales is *At the Back of the North Wind*, which he serialized in "Good Words for the Young" (1868-69) as its editor. Now in its centennial year, this two-dimensional fairytale, which reads at times like a novelette, is, with the *Alice* books by MacDonald's close friend Lewis Carroll, the Victorian masterpiece of dream-world fantasy, not necessarily restricted to children.

The tale itself sweeps us along somewhere between London and the country at the back of the North Wind, actually MacDonald's imaginative depiction of Thurso, with its treeless skyline and icy northern winds, where he had gone, in the summer of 1842, to catalogue the library of Sir George Sinclair. A student on leave from King's College, Aberdeen, MacDonald revived, at age eighteen, his childhood discovery, turning North Wind this time into a beautiful lady, with raven-black, streaming hair, the wise woman who had instructive powers which Cinderella's godmother lacked. She was, for MacDonald, symbolic of Nature's maternal side, fairyland's ruling Queen.

#### A VISIT TO AMERICA

1872 was certainly the most outstanding year in MacDonald's life. He accepted the invitation to make a lecture tour in the United States. Upon his arrival with his wife and son Greville, on the Cunard S. S. Malta, MacDonald was cordially met by the famous James T. Field, who hurried the MacDonalds off to his plush "Morris style home" in a distinguished part of Boston.

The Scottish bard's first lecture was on Robert Burns, the first Burns lecture, so I am told, to be given in America. It took place on October 15th (1872), with a "blaze of carmine or rather blood-colour elm trees" outside Union Hall, Cambridgeport. "There were two thousand eight hundred and fifty ticket holders, besides a few that got in as friends," Mrs. MacDonald reported to her bairns. "Such a hall! with two balconies all round it. They say Papa was heard in every corner of it."

At the conclusion, Mr. Field, "his eyes full of tears," rushed forward to shake Mr. MacDonald's hand; "and declared there had been nothing like it since Dickens." A certain Mr. Redpath almost angrily retorted: "See here, Mr. MacDonald, why didn't you say you could do this sort of thing? We'd have got 300 dollars a lecture for you!"

Offered the pastorate of a church in New York, on Fifth Avenue, at the incredible sum of \$20,000 per annum, MacDonald refused. He agreed to do a novel with Mark Twain in order to obtain international copyright; but in 1873 he returned with his wife and son to Hammersmith, The Retreat, London, where, as father of eleven children (and two adopted), he spent the happiest years of his life.

#### THAT GOLDEN MOMENT

MacDonald's two adult romances, *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895), are his recognized masterpieces; they are well vignette glimpses into his youthful dreams and passions (*Phantastes*), his old man's fears and visions (*Lilith*). It is nearly impossible to describe them adequately; their make-believe cosmology is almost as evasive as North Wind herself, the reader wanders down through endless dark cells of the Self. In MacDonald's Jungian corridors one meets, for example, *Lilith*, feminine symbol of sexual frustration and loneliness; and, on the way up, one experiences filial warmth, that cozy feeling of being at home with one's self, God, and others. In a word, *Phantastes* and *Lilith* are best described as "soul-romances," the adult side of Fairyland.

The last page of *Lilith* is MacDonald's endless fairytale. The hero, Mr. Vane, having returned safely from his journey into the seventh dimension, muses over the "Strange dim memories, which will not abide identification. . ." and concludes: "But when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more." And then there comes that "golden moment": "I wait; asleep or awake, I wait. Novalis says: 'Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one.'"

For George MacDonald his great wait began on September 18th, 1905, at Ashstead, Surrey. Mistress North Wind hied him off, finally, to her cave of eternal dreams. He went home.

"The Legend of the Cairngorm Stone"

(Written in imitation of George MacDonald)

A long, long time ago in Scotland, there lived somewhere in the Cairngorm mountains a very wise and beautiful old woman. Some thought she was a witch because of her great powers. She could bestow gifts (and curses) on whomever she wished.

One day a fair, sky-eyed lassie, with tumbling red hair wandered into the old woman's forest hut, which was actually nothing more than a cave in the side of the mountain. The lassie longed to know her destiny; she found the old woman tending a roaring peat fire; shadows flitted about the walls of the cave in the semi-darkness. Mary, for that was her name, crept timidly up to the open fire. With crackling voice the old woman demanded why she had come. Mary gazed silently into the glowing fire--a single tear fell into the blazing flames.

Then a very strange thing happened: the old woman lifted her beautiful arms, brushing aside her flowing black hair, and addressed the fire: "Burn, burn thrice bright, make of this

lassie's tear her future part!" Instantly Mary saw, flashing in the flames, a glittering diamond-studded crown, and in the center she saw herself. Overcome by excitement she plunged her wee hands into the flames, attempting to seize the burning crown. Back she drew her singed fingers: in the palm of her left hand there remained a single heart-shaped stone, cooling slowly into a smoky gem. Proudly she clutched it, while the old woman cried: "the Cairngorm be thine as long as thy love be fire-burnt--the crown must be given to another."

And thus it was that Mary Queen of Scots first learned of her ill-fated reign--all because one lass had courage enough to take her heart's desire without fear.



## An Annotated Bibliography of Tolkien Criticism —Supplement Two

COMPILED BY Richard West

This is a continuation of the effort to list all books and articles by and about J. R. R. Tolkien, begun with the bibliographies published in Orcrist #1 and #2. As always, Section A is devoted to works by Tolkien and Section B to scholarly and critical investigations of these works. Annotations are kept as objective as I can make them; an asterisk (\*) indicates that I consider that entry worth reading for some reason. I have used the symbol "#" to designate an entry which has appeared in the bibliography before but is here repeated with some addition or correction. It will be noticed that I have abandoned assigning each item a separate letter and number (e.g., A1, B1, etc.) and cross-referencing entries by this means. This was very convenient for a single printing of the bibliography, but, since entries are arranged alphabetically by author, it meant that new insertions in the list could not be made without re-numbering or some other awkwardness. I am now making cross-references by author, which I trust will occasion no confusion.

### SECTION A

"Henry Bradley, 3 December 1845 - 23 May 1923," Bulletin of the Modern Humanities Research Association, No. 20 (October, 1923), pp. 4-5. Epitaph for a fellow scholar.

"Some Contributions to Middle-English Lexicography," Review of English Studies Vol. I (April, 1925), pp. 210-215.

"The Devil's Coach-Horses," Review of English Studies Vol. I (July, 1925), pp. 331-336. Notes on Middle English aevers.

### SECTION B

Carter, Lin. "Notes on Tolkien, Part I: Theme and Form," Xero No. 7 (November, 1961). Xero is a science-fiction fanzine. This article and the three following ones were incorporated in Carter's book (see below, Look).

Carter, Lin. "Notes on Tolkien, Part II: Names and Places," Xero No. 8 (May, 1962).

Carter, Lin. "Notes on Tolkien, Part III: Sources and Influences," Xero No. 9 (September, 1962).

Carter, Lin. "What About This Tolkien Fellow, Anyway?" Triumph (November, 1966). Evidently a condensed version of the Xero articles.

Carter, Lin. Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings. New York: Ballantine, 1969. An expansion of the three Xero articles, giving a brief biography of JRRT, plot summaries of H and LOTR, a treatment of Tolkien's ideas on fantasy, and a discussion of a tradition of fantasy from Gilgamesh to the present day (sweeping over classical epic, French chansons de geste, Spanish and Italian epic, Spenser, William Morris, Lord Dunsany, Eddison, Pratt, Peake, Kendall, Garner, and Alexander), with the Scandinavian Eddas and sagas seen as the major wellspring of Tolkien's inspiration. Mr. Carter's enthusiasm is infectious, but much of his commentary on older works suffers from a lack of historical perspective and there are many inaccuracies in his book.

Del Ray, Lester. "A Report on J. R. R. Tolkien," Worlds of Fantasy Vol. I, No. 1 (October, 1968), pp. 84-85. Article in a science-fiction "pulp" magazine. JRRT has revolutionized modern literature and single-handedly created a demand for fantasy in soft-cover publishing. His books are "filled with such things as the love of beauty, the dignity of ordinary people, and the conflict of good and evil" (p. 85).

Derrick, Christopher. "And See Ye Not Yon Bonny Road?" Tablet Vol. 222 (February 10, 1968), p. 132. SWM review. JRRT is here a miniaturist, offering a sad, wise book that is a myth of great delicacy, teaching that ordinary life deserves a patient and positive attitude.

Egoff, Sheila. The Republic of Childhood: A Critical Guide to Canadian Children's Literature in English. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967. Brief mention of JRRT. H "is a fantasy set in a world that never was...and yet it is English to the core..." (p. 3). H and LOTR "have epitomized fantasy for our own generation" (p. 136).

Evans, W. D. Emrys. "The Lord of the Rings," The School Librarian Vol. 16, No. 3 (December, 1968), pp. 284-288. General discussion article, dealing with: the rigorously opposed but complex forces of good and evil; the ring of power as a measure of the strength of those who resist its temptation; the skilful blending of diverse strands of mythology; the beauty and power of places, things, and names.

Léaud, Francis. "L'Épopée Religieuse de J. R. R. Tolkien," Études Anglaises Tome XX, No. 3 (1967), pp. 265-281. JRRT's work is little-known in France. It is not enjoyed by positivist readers, but appeals to people of a broadly religious temperament (whether or not they have a formal creed). To provide too precise an interpretation would betray the text, but in general the mythic fantasy of H and LOTR speaks without ever naming them of the mysteries of Providence and grace. JRRT's mastery of language also helps explain his appeal. The living world of Middle Earth compares favorably with the dramatized Europe of War and Peace.

Ready, William Bernard. "The Tolkien Relation," Canadian Library Vol. 25 (September, 1968), pp. 128-136. Not to be confused with the same author's book of the same title. Tolkien's fantasy is essentially religious in character and relates man to the world around him, making of life the struggle that it really must be. For those who are interested, W. P. Dagger has an article about Mr. Ready in Canadian Library Vol. 24 (May, 1968), pp. 651-652.

#Ready, William. Understanding Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings. New York: Paperback Library, 1969. Soft-cover reprint of his book, The Tolkien Relation, published in 1968. Annotated in Supplement One of this bibliography, in Orcrist #2.

Reinken, Donald L. "J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: A Christian Refounding of the Political Order," Christian Perspectives: An Ecumenical Quarterly (Winter, 1966), pp. 16-23.