ISSN 1755-9928 (Print)
ISSN 2753-3298 (Online)

Journal of
Scottish Thought

Research Articles

‘A Faint Mass and a Clear Edge’: The Nature of Landscape in George MacDonald’s Fiction

Author: J. Patrick Pazdziora

Volume 12, Issue 1
Pp: 46-69
2020
Published on: 1st Jan 2020
CC Attribution 4.0

1495
ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

‘A Faint Mass and a Clear Edge’: The Nature of Landscape in George MacDonald’s Fiction

J. Patrick Pazdziora

In his short story ‘The Snow Fight’ (1872), George MacDonald performs a skillful sleight-of-hand with the Scottish landscape. The story begins simply: ‘In a certain village in the north of Scotland there were two schools.’[1] The formula is familiar enough: in a certain place there was such-and-such a thing—a cowardly tailor, a man who had three daughters, Tam o’ Shanter’s mare. This is the once-upon-a-time beginning of a fairy tale. And yet the narrator takes pains to situate the story not simply long ago and far away, ‘[i]n a certain village’, but specifically ‘in the north of Scotland.’ The story does not, ostensibly, require a Scottish setting; however, MacDonald gives it not just a country but a specific, even mimetic locality:

> It was a curious little street. Low gables of stone-built cottages, several of them broken into corbel-steps, and most of them pierced with only one or two little windows, leaving a large space of unfeatured wall, a mere defence against the weather; now and then the front of a more pretentious house of two stories and four or five windows; here a little shop with peg-tops, called *pears* in that part, but pronounced *peers*, and ginger-bread nuts, called *gibbery*, mingled in the harmonious confusion of human necessities; then the staring new-built residence of the chief tradesmen of the place, next to a little chapel—such were the principal features of the street, unessential to my story, I confess—only you cannot help thinking a little of what your frame shall be when you want to hang up your new-bought picture. (10)

The narrator makes the astonishing claim that place, space, and landscape are unimportant. They are ‘unessential to my story’, relegated to ‘frame’ the real drama: the class-based struggle and moral education of Masters Ferguson and Fraser. The *essence* of the story, as it were, is the lesson the two boys learn about

[1] ‘The Snow Fight’, *Good Words for the Young* (1872), 9. Further citation given in text.

being young gentlemen – and is, incidentally, told entirely in English.

But what about that frame? The narrator protests its unimportance, but the readers should remember the persistent, thick-skulled unreliability of MacDonald's narrators, and the sly wit of the author that mocks their self-defeating lugubriousness. The description of the village street in fact roots the whole story. On the one end stand almost windowless stone cottages, while on the other end sit the chapel and the flashy new homes of the well-to-do, between are the 'pretentious' multilevel houses of, presumably, the middle-class. The street ranges from simple shelter to political and cultural power, with aspiration balanced in the middle. Each end of the street has an attendant school—parish and private (9). And as the defining centre of the street we see the toy-store and the sweetshop—twin paradises of childhood. These, in turn, are localised by the story's only use of Scots; both *peer* for a wooden top[2] and *gibbery* meaning 'gingerbread' are words specific to Aberdeenshire.[3] Thus the 'frame' clarifies the moral conflict of the story: Fraser and Ferguson, from the well-to-do end of the street, are growing towards stunted or stalwart adulthood, respectively, based on their treatment of wee Johnny Webster from the poor end of the street. A compassion born from recognition of shared humanity triumphs over the pretentions of class and political power; the lesson is learned through the games and hijinks of an Aberdeenshire childhood. The particularly Scottish setting in the children confront the realities both of their own social situation and their moral character provides a proving ground for their later character in adulthood.

The Scottish landscape in MacDonald's fiction exerts a real, formative influence on his characters; it nurtures the children who play in it and the adults who work on it. The nature of the place forms the nature of the people who live there. While the narrator of 'The Snow Fight' may be cheerily dismissive of the importance of landscape in his own tale, certainly landscape plays a vital, sometimes crucial, role in many if not most of MacDonald's works. This paper, then, attempts to consider this 'frame' of landscape that surrounds MacDonald's narratives.

MacDonald's fiction, I suggest, contains three basic types of landscape. He of course employs the ancient distinction between town and country, but for his own aesthetic purposes. The *country* in MacDonald often represents the

---

[2] "Peer n.1". *Dictionary of the Scots Language*. 2004. Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd. <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/peer_n1> [Accessed 21 Nov 2017].

[3] "Gibbery n.1". *Dictionary of the Scots Language*. 2004. Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd. <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/gibbery_n1> [Accessed 21 Nov 2017].

security and shelter of home, family, native language, and so on. The countryside serves as the home environment from which MacDonald's protagonists set forth, and to which they may eventually return. This is apparent in works such as *Robert Falconer* (1868), and *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* (1870). The *city* by contrast serves as an alien space which provides the embodiment of the inner disturbances of the protagonist—think of *Alec Forbes* (1865) or *David Elginbrod* (1863), or even *Lilith* (1895). In this sense MacDonald anticipates the psychologised cities of the late-Victorians, notably James Thomson and Robert Louis Stevenson. To this dichotomy, he adds a third space, which I will call the *wild*—the natural world, behaving according to its own laws of nature, older and stronger than human habitation. The wild functions partly as a greenwood space that MacDonald's characters journey into; it is also active, wearing away at the boundaries of civilisation and occasionally overstepping and attacking civilised space. Water belongs to the wild, for instance in MacDonald's not infrequent use of floods, as do storms; fairyland is also the greenwood and the wild. Between each of these three landscapes, there is the possibility of a liminal space, in which the characters are caught betwixt and between, and need to decide whether to go forward or back; an exemplary scene might be wee Sir Gibbie, standing gazing at 'the dark river' on the bridge from city to country, dazed with the loss of home and safety, and not knowing what lies ahead.[4]

These three landscapes recur throughout MacDonald's fiction. A full analysis of all three types in MacDonald's novels, to say nothing of his fairy tales, short stories, and poetry, is matter for a much longer study. This essay will restrict itself to considering the way in which MacDonald himself understood the role of landscape in his fiction, the Scottish landscape in particular. To do this, I will look first at his own use of the Romantic landscape of the Swiss Alps, and then address, second, the intrusion of the wild onto the other landscapes, town and country, of Aberdeenshire.

'It was a gorgeous evening'

The human geographer Denis Cosgrove has suggested that '[l]andscape is a way of seeing the world.'[5] Specifically, he identifies this way of seeing with the historical development of landscape painting in the Early Modern period, whereby the painter could impose a particular, individual way of seeing onto a material space. 'Observed in this painterly way, landscapes could be beautiful,

[4] *Sir Gibbie* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1879), I, 113–14.

[5] Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison,1998), 13.

sublime, tame, monotonous, despoiled. They engaged in a subjective response in those who observed or experienced them. Landscape was therefore invested from outside with human meaning.'[6] So the way of seeing is specifically 'the view of the outsider, a term of order and control, whether that term is technical, political, or intellectual.'[7] While it is not necessary to interpret MacDonald through Cosgrove's theories about the interrelation of landscape and cultural production, it is helpful, to retain this notion of a painterly, spatially etic perspective on the literary presentation of landscape. Put another way, if landscape is a way of seeing, it can also be a way of reading; if a landscape can be painted, it can also be written.

This, at least, seems akin to MacDonald's own contention. In a striking passage near the end of *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), Annie Anderson, after suffering a sexual assault from by the grocer's son, leaves the village of Glamerton to walk to her aunt's home across the river.

> It was a gorgeous evening. The sun was going down in purple and crimson, divided by such bars of gold as never grew in the mines of Ophir. A faint rosy mist hung its veil over the hills about the sunset; and a torrent of red light streamed down the westward road by which she went. The air was soft, and the light sobered with a sense of the coming twilight. It was such an evening as we have, done into English, in the ninth Evening Voluntary of Wordsworth. And Annie felt it such.[8]

While the bluntness of the literary allusion is perhaps a bit jarring, the assertion that the visual and emotional impression of a sunset can be rendered 'into English' seems a distinct artistic claim. So, too, is the choice of poem. Wordsworth's ninth *Evening Voluntary*, from 1818, is given the heading 'Composed on an Evening of Extraordinary Beauty and Splendour'; it describes how a sunset produces 'a multiplication of mountain ridges' by slanting through 'watery vapours, or sunny haze' so that it appear as, Wordsworth explains, 'a kind of Jacob's Ladder'.[9] MacDonald would have been aware of Dante's use of Jacob's Ladder in the *Paradiso* as a symbol of religious discipline and spiritual perfection, so Wordsworth's description of the ladder's appearance in the natural world would have had no little appeal

---

[6] Ibid., 17.

[7] Ibid., 36.

[8] *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (London, 1865), III, 190. Further citations given in the text.

[9] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (London, 1857), IV, 135.

to him.[10] Furthermore, Wordsworth addresses the poem, at least in part, to those 'whom broken ties | Afflict, or injuries assail' (III.1-2) as an invitation to climb 'On those bright steps that heavenward raise | Their practicable way' (III.11-12). Annie Anderson, distraught after the assault, is thus receiving spiritual substance from the vista of nature; assailed by injury, her gaze is turned heavenward, and the possibility of attaining union with God, through a vision of the sunset over the Scottish landscape.

It seems hardly accidental that MacDonald also read portions the ninth Evening Voluntary for his lecture 'Wordsworth's Poetry', describing it as 'one of Wordsworth's finest poems'.[11] The poem is fairly lengthy, but the opening, read in the lecture by MacDonald, is worth quoting in full:

> Had this effulgence disappeared
> With flying haste, I might have sent,
> Among the speechless clouds, a look
> Of blank astonishment;
> But 'tis endued with the power to stay,
> And sanctify one closing day,
> That frail Mortality may see—
> What is?—ah no, but what *can* be! (I.1–8)

MacDonald introduces this passage with a discussion of what he says is 'perhaps the best thing that can be done for us, the best at least that nature can do', that is, to engender 'that mood or condition in which thoughts come of themselves' (254). He refers specifically to thoughts 'of love, and truth, and purity', in other words spontaneous, non-discursive prayer. He continues:

> If the world proceeded from the imagination of God, and man proceeded from the love of God, it is easy to believe that that which proceeded from the imagination of God should rouse the best thoughts in the mind of a being who proceeded from the love of God. This I think is the relation between man and the world. (254)

The result of such an experience, MacDonald says, is remembering 'the

[10] *Paradiso*, XXII. 61–75. Dante specifically associates the image with the Rule of St Benedict.

[11] George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakspere*, Second Edition (London, 1893), 254. Further citations to this essay given in the text.

simplicity of childhood' and a 'vow […] to press on towards the things that are unseen, but which are manifested through the things that are seen' (256). Here, as elsewhere, MacDonald recasts the Romantic idyll of nature into Christian mysticism. Evelyn Underhill, whose classic text on the subject has yet to be surpassed, argues that mysticism is

> […] the abolition of individuality; of that hard separateness, that "I, Me, Mine" which makes of man a finite isolated thing. It is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain, to satisfy no transcendental curiosity, to obtain no other-worldly joys, but purely from an instinct of love.[12]

For MacDonald, Nature serves as a catalyst of that 'instinct of love' which propels the individual to surrender their 'hard separateness' for union with the Real, which MacDonald, as a devout Christian, understood to be God in Christ. Nature could prompt this effect of love because, like humanity themselves, it proceeded from the generative power of God, expressing something of the divine character. Thus the imagination of God – that is, nature – connects with the love of God – that is, humankind – to engender a new conception of reality; Nature manifests not simply the seen, or material world, as it already is, but offers the hope of the unseen: 'what can be!'[13]

MacDonald's language here is explicitly Trinitarian, evoking not only the creed ('who proceedeth from the Father and the Son' etc. – itself using the wording of St John's Gospel)[14] but an entire mystical theology of how humankind and the natural world relate to the Trinity. The basic concept – that creation proceeds from the mind of God – is ancient, originating with the Enneads of Plotinus and was recast by St Augustine, Origen, and many others as a means of articulating the Trinity.[15] MacDonald's wording here is peculiar, even idiosyncratic; he appears to be triangulating several different

---

[12] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 3rd edn. (New York, 1912), 85.

[13] Wordsworth and MacDonald both are likely referencing the First Epistle of St John (3.2): 'Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.' MacDonald also references Hosea 6. 3, 'let us press on to know the Lord', II Corinthians 4. 18 and, likely, Hebrews 11. 1.

[14] St John 15. 26

[15] Cf. Underhill, 127ff.

mystical sources in order to develop his own idea.

The most likely influence is Jakob Böhme; MacDonald certainly had read Böhme as early as 1863, when he quotes William Law's translation in *David Elginbrod*.[16] Böhme, in his best-known book *Aurora* (1612), specifically connects a study of the natural world with the outworking of the Trinity:

> If thou wilt be a Philosopher and *Naturalist*, and search into *God's Being in Nature*, and discern how all is come to pass, then pray to God for the Holy Spirit, to enlighten thee with it. […] In the Holy Ghost alone, who is in God, and also in the whole Nature, out of which all Things were made, in him alone thou canst search into the whole Body or Corporeity of God, which is *Nature*, as also into the Holy Trinity itself. For the Holy Ghost goes forth from the Holy Trinity, and reigns and rules in the *whole Body* or *Corpus* of God; that is, in the whole Nature.[17]

Similarly, William Law, in his general introduction to Jakob Böhme's thought, explains that '[h]is Writings begin where the Spirit of God begun [*sic*] in the first Rise of Nature and Creature'. Law claims that the writings are 'showing how all Things came from a *working Will* of the Holy Triune Incomprehensible God, manifesting himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' and how the life of the children of God began 'in and from this divine Fire, which is the *Father of Light*, generating a *Birth of Light* in their Souls, from both which *proceeds* the *Holy Spirit*, or *Breath* of Divine Love in the Triune Creature, as it does in the Triune Creator'.[18]

Aurora is a deliberately opaque text, intertwining a surfeit of alchemical symbolism with an already difficult theology. Given Böhme's fondness for puns, it is not immediately clear which definition of *nature* he intends – whether the natural will or personality. It would require a separate study to assess whether MacDonald's understanding of *Aurora* was entirely correct, but it does seem likely that, reading *Aurora* back through the Romantics, MacDonald would formulate the concept he puts forward in 'Wordsworth's Poetry', conflating the 'Nature' of Jakob Böhme with the 'Nature' of Wordsworth. Indeed, the ninth chapter of *David Elginbrod* is entitled, simply, 'Nature'; it bears as an

[16] *David Elginbrod* (London, 1863), I, 100.

[17] Jakob Böhme and William Law, *The Works of Jacob Behmen: the Teutonic Philosopher* (London, 1764), I, 28, II.15, 17-19. Emphasis in original. Law's translation is cited throughout as the text which MacDonald knew.

[18] William Law, "A Dialogue between Zelotes, Aliphabetus, Rusticus, and Theophilus" in *The Works of Jacob Behmen*, I, vi. Emphasis in original.

epigraph a quotation about the Holy Spirit from *Aurora*,[19] and begins with Margaret Elginbrod reading Wordsworth. Margaret's reading 'introduced her to nature in many altogether new aspects,'[20] with the result that she recognises the possibility for mystical enlightenment in her own, distinctly Scottish landscape: '[n]ot only was the pine wood now dearer to her than before, but its mystery seemed more sacred, and, at the same time, more likely to be one day solved. She felt far more assuredly the presence of a spirit in nature […]'[21] Compare that with Jakob Böhme's assertion that the Holy Spirit is 'in the whole Nature'; reading Wordsworth has awoken Margaret to a dim conception of what Jakob Böhme shouts from the housetops.

So, according to MacDonald, Wordsworth's ninth *Evening Voluntary* suggests this: the Holy Spirit, the 'Breath of Divine Love', reigns over the whole of Nature; the man or woman contemplating the natural world, themselves offspring of the Love of God, responds to the Holy Spirit in Nature with spontaneous contemplative prayer. The Holy Spirit, immanent in the natural world, draws the individual soul to be attentive of the godhead; the study of Nature and the adoration of the Trinity are thus essentially the same act. The mind and the love of God meet when humankind is attentive to Nature: the creature and the Triune Creator are harmonised through the Breath of Divine Love animating all things.

Now, it seems rather probable that this is *not* what Wordsworth had in mind. MacDonald is playing a sort of philosophical shell game with Romanticism; ostensibly explaining an English Romantic text, he neatly replaces it with a Christian conception of mystical union with the divine, and says, in effect, ah yes, Nature must mean this because Wordsworth said so. In fact, MacDonald is propounding his own mystical understanding of Nature, self, and poetry, under Wordsworth's imprimatur. Either this represents a profound work of eisegesis on MacDonald's part – of which he was certainly capable – or else he calculated that his hearers would be more likely to accept philosophical and theological ideas from outside the main current of Christian thought if they seemed to come from Wordsworth. Whatever the cause, by apparently invoking Wordsworth, MacDonald is rather invoking his own complex, mystically-

[19] Jakob Böhme and William Law, I , 21. The passage immediately before MacDonald's quotation declares that the soul 'searches into the *Deity*; and also into *Nature*'. The use of Böhme in this context seems more significant given the care MacDonald took selecting the epigraphs for *David Elginbrod,* literally pasting them on to the top of the manuscript pages.

[20] MacDonald, *David Elginbrod*, III, 101.

[21] Ibid., 102.

inclined framework of Christian theology, rather than the comparatively more conventional trappings of English Romanticism.

Given this complex, mystical understanding of the landscape, it is worth considering what effect the Scottish landscape has on the characters in *Alec Forbes*, before turning to consider more deeply why it has that effect. The hypothesis stated give earlier posits that there are three kinds of landscape in MacDonald's fiction: the country, or home landscape; the city, or the psychological landscape; and the wild, a greenwood space in which the characters undergo maturation. The Alps are, for MacDonald, what could be typified as a *wild* landscape. He would also use the Alps as a surrogate for the divine vision in *Wilfrid Cumbermede* (1872); we can think, too, of the mountain in *The Princess and the Goblin* or the meditation on mountains that opens *The Princess and Curdie,* among others.[22] While the threefold division of landscape types can be found throughout much of MacDonald's work, for considerations of space, this essay will turn to consider the conflict between the wild landscape and the home landscape in MacDonald's literary portrayal of Aberdeenshire.

'A terrible country'

The wilds in MacDonald are not infrequently associated with water. To choose a few examples at random, consider the 'stream of clear water' that goes 'running over the carpet' and lures Anodos into Fairy Land in *Phantastes* (1858); the burn that Colin reroutes through his cottage in 'The Fairy Fleet' (1866), bringing said fairy flotilla floating up to his bed; or Sir Gibbie's wandering 'up Daurside'; the entire, brooding presence of the sea over *Malcolm* (1875); or even the Land of Waters in *Lilith* (1895).[23] Such instances could be multiplied. Glamerton, the fictionalised Huntly of *Alec Forbes*, stands just above the juncture of two rivers: the *Glamour* and the *Wan*. MacDonald describes Glamerton from 'one of the highest hills surrounding the valley', as seen by the protagonist, Alec Forbes, who is walking with his ill-starred sweetheart, Kate:

> The country lay outstretched beneath in the glow of the June day, while around them flitted the cool airs of heaven. […] Through the green

[22] *The Princess and the Goblin* (Whitehorn, CA., 1997), 9ff; *The Princess and Curdie* (Whitehorn, CA., 1997), 9ff.

[23] George MacDonald, *Phantastes* (London, 1858), 9; 'The Fairy Fleet', *The Argosy* (1866), 417–32 (418ff); *Malcolm* (London, 1875), I, 14–21; *Lilith* (Whitethorn, CA., 1994; repr. 1998), 118.

> grass and the green corn below crept two silvery threads, meeting far away and flowing into one—the two rivers which watered the valley of Strathglamour. Between the rivers lay the gray stone town, with its roofs of thatch and slate. One of its main streets stopped suddenly at the bridge with the three arches above Tibbie's cottage; and at the other end of the bridge lay the green fields. (II, 143–4)

This is quite a faithful description of the Deveron and Bogie rivers meeting beyond Huntly; the sharp contrast between the dense, grey slate and granite city centre and the lumping, wooded hills beyond is an arresting feature of the village landscape.[24] How MacDonald fictionalises this landscape, however, reveals what he wants to do with it. The significance of the river name *glamour* should be self-evident, recalling as it does the *glamourie* of the fairy world, the enchantment and entrapment of mortals as recalled in Scottish folklore – think of the river of blood over which the Fairy Queen bears Thomas Rhymer.[25] This, as David Robb has suggested,[26] is likely the source of the name *Glamerton*; similarly, *Strathglamour* can be translated as 'Valley of Enchantment'.[27] And this gives, I think, a clear indication of the way in which MacDonald is employing realistic details of Scottish landscape within the novel. *Glamerton* would be a perfectly predictable name for a Scottish town in the valley *Strathglamour*, both named after the river *Glamour*; such formulas are, to the best of my knowledge, characteristic of many Scottish place names. But it also suggests that the town and its inhabitants are within reach of the *glamour* of the wild spaces beyond.

Notice, too, that the bridge provides a sharp demarcation between the grey Aberdonian houses and the green fields, and that the rivers creep through the green corn. Green, as MacDonald well knew, is the colour of fairy;[28] across the

[24] A recent report on Huntly as a conservation area notes that '[t]he dense urban form within Huntly contrasts sharply with the openness of the Bogie and Deveron river valley and the hill country beyond.' *Huntly: Conservation Area Review 2013* (Aberdeen, 2013), 12 <https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/6352/huntlyconservationareareview.pdf> [accessed 16 May 2018]. This helpfully detailed and illustrated booklet may be a helpful companion to any critic or reader studying MacDonald's landscapes and unable to easily visit Huntly themselves.

[25] Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton:, 2001), 74–5.

[26] David S. Robb, *George MacDonald* (Edinburgh, 1987), 35.

[27] This is perhaps an allusion to the Enchanted Ground in the Ninth Stage of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), especially given the languid sensuality of the young people's summer afternoon together; intertextuality between MacDonald and the Puritans is, however, beyond the scope of this study.

[28] Henderson and Cowan, 57–9.

Glamour, then, is the wild landscape of 'fair elfland.' Alec and Kate, looking down at the small, secure space of the rural, home landscape, are positioned as liminal viewers. They are of the town, but looking beyond it into the enchanted landscape beyond; as young people, indeed, they are at no small risk of being lured away by the pied-piper call of the wide world, and, through their time at Aberdeen, they are already exchanging grown-up life in the city for their rural childhoods. Put another way, they are being stolen away by the fairies; for those they leave behind, such as Alec's mother or Thomas Crann, there's little difference between the social reality and the fairy tale.

The name *Wan* is rather more curious. The river is first given its full name of Wan Water when Alec Forbes goes for 'a ramble through the snow' after being 'confined to the house' after a dog bite; he is, the narrator assures us, 'rejoicing in his freedom' on his 'solitary walk' (I, 169). So the Wan Water appears in the novel at a moment of liberation and vitality in a young man's life. In his essay 'Imagination, Its Functions and Culture' (1867), written a few years after *Alec Forbes*, MacDonald includes a brief discussion of Tennyson's 'Morte D'Arthur' (1833) as an example of the 'poetic facility' of 'choosing, gathering, and combining the material of a new revelation' contrasting it with Thomas Malory's original.[29] The passage from Malory MacDonald chooses for the analysis is Sir Bedivere's answer to Arthur: 'Sir, I saw nothing but the waters wap and the waves wan.'[30] MacDonald appends a paragraph-long

[29] MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 22.

[30] MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 23. This quotation suggests that MacDonald was consulting, and probably owned, the three-volume 1816 R. Wilks edition of Malory, edited by Joseph Haslewood. The widespread 1817 Longman's edition, with notes by Robert Southey, enjoyed popularity with MacDonald's friends among the pre-Raphaelites; it was, however, a reproduction of Caxton's 1485 text, so the passage under consideration is of course different: 'Syr he sayd I saw no thynge but the waters wappe and wawes wan' (II, 441). It could, of course, be posited that MacDonald merely offers his own gloss of the Middle English, but this explanation fails to satisfy for a number of reasons. MacDonald is persistent in referring to Malory's work as 'The History of Prince Arthur'; see for instance *Wilfrid Cumbermede* (London, 1872), I, 193. This title is used by the rival 1816 editions. Of the two, Alexander Chalmers' edition, from Walker and Edwards, was more affordable, and apparently consulted by Tennyson; Chalmers, however, renders the passage in a fairly straight gloss from Caxton: 'I saw nothing but the water, wap, and waves waun' (II, 473); the punctuation suggests that 'wap' is being glossed as a noun. This reading is clearly at variance with the text MacDonald quotes here. Significantly Haslewood's text not only glosses 'wap' as a verb, as MacDonald's note asserts, but also adds a definite article to accentuate the parallelism : 'I saw nothing but the water wap and the waves wan' (III, 359). This is identical to the text as MacDonald quotes it. Additionally, the running header on each page spread of Haslewood's edition reads 'The History

footnote to this quotation, discussing the possible etymological derivations of the word *wan*, which he defines as 'dark, gloomy, turbid,' and says is 'a common adjective to a river in an the old Scotch ballad.'[31] This, then, would appear to be his reason for choosing the name Wan Water, again connecting his story with the ballad traditions; yet the length and detail of the note suggests that the word and its greater significance in the ballads had no little interest for him. This, too, could be another reason: the older word gives his town and its inhabitants rootedness in an only imperfectly remembered past.

There is a third possible reason for the name: in *Phantastes*, the story of Cosmo ends as he dies in the princess's arms, before they are both found by her maidservant. The final line of the fairy tale reads: '[w]hen Lisa came up, she found her mistress kneeling above a wan, dead face, which smiled on the spectral moonbeams.'[32] So already in MacDonald's work, the adjective *wan* has clear textual connection between Scottish ballads and death. This, too, relates to the corollary river of the *Glamour*; the land of the fairies was the land of the dead, and to be *glamoured* by the fairies was effectively to mistake the grim underworld for a place of beauty, riches, and pleasure.[33] It seems all the more significant then, when MacDonald describes the Wan Water as Alec walks beside it:

> […] wan enough it was now with its snow-sheet over it! As he stood looking at its still, dead face, and lamenting that the snow lay too deep over the ice to admit of skating, by a sudden reaction, a summer-vision of the live water arose before him. (1,169-70)

The water itself is described as dead, in fact *wan* with a 'dead face' like Cosmo. Alec, alone and wandering solitary, gazes on the Wan Water and confronts both the reality of winter and the idea of death. And yet, almost immediately, he seizes on 'a summer-vision' and 'the live water arose'; in

---

of Prince Arthur' (as opposed to 'King Arthur, and his Knights of the Round Table' in Chalmers); this seems a probable derivation for MacDonald's use of this title to refer to the Matter of Britain. A discussion of the print history of Malory's text can be found at Kara L. McShane, 'Malory's Morte d'Arthur: Exhibition Guide', in *The Camelot Project* <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/mcshane-malorys-morte-d-arthur-exhibition-guide> [accessed 17 May 2018]

[31] MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 23 n7.

[32] *Phantastes*, 182.

[33] William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring, Herts, 1987), 148; cf. Henderson and Cowan, 19–20, 60–1.

other words, he apprehends in essence both death and the resurrection from the dead. He does not, however, articulate this to himself in spiritual terms, but senses it in the seasonal cycle of the land. It is from the occluded, 'snow-sheeted' landscape that he has his first understanding of spring and summer as rebirth. He responds by building a boat: a way in which he can immerse himself into this landscape without – significantly – needing to actually cross the river.

So the landscape of Glamerton, then, is bounded by the waters of fairy on the one side, the waters of death on the other, flowing into each other and both, arguably the same place. This connects literarily to the Scottish ballad tradition, and to the mythological death of Arthur. Crossing out of the home-scape of Glamerton, even just looking across it, the protagonists face a wild space, uncanny and otherworldly:

> A terrible country they came from—those two ocean-bound rivers—up among the hill-tops. There on the desolate peat-mosses, spongy, black, and cold, the rain was pouring into the awful holes whence generations had dug their fuel, and into the natural chasms of the earth, soaking the soil, and sending torrents, like the flaxen hair of a Titanic Naiad, rolling into the bosom of the rising river-god below. The mist hung there, darkening everything with its whiteness, ever sinking in slow fall upon the slippery peat and the heather and the gray old stones. (II, 263)

The source of the two rivers is described as wild and desolate; as David Robb notes in his essay in this issue, the 'landscapes of the northeast could be places of danger and death.'[34] Here as elsewhere, MacDonald's description shifts from the literal – 'peat-mosses, spongy, black, and cold' – into the mythological: a 'Titanic Naiad' having some sort of liaison with the 'river-god below'. The realistic landscape, a north Scotland peat-bog like many one could actually see, becomes identified with an otherworldly being. This sense of the landscape being haunted, of the wilds being inhabited or at least pervaded with the suggestion of inhabitancy, of being unco if you will, seems pervasive in MacDonald's fiction. So, in his short story 'A Journey Rejourneyed' (1865), the narrator James Bayley remarks that after seeing the mountains 'I think I understand what gave rise to the grand old fable of the Giants' explaining how '[i]n once mountain especially, in the west of Scotland, I see the shoulders of

[34] See p. 17.

a giant heaving away from his neck and down-bend head the weary weight of centuries'.[35] Folklore and fairy tradition, then, emerge as a way of seeing particular landscape, and particularly the wild landscapes. Folklore, as well, is tied with a historical sense, 'the weight of centuries' or the 'generations' that dug for peat. Out of this haunted landscape flows the water that both shapes the Scottish village and lures away its children.

Fear of water, indeed, is a recurrent theme throughout *Alec Forbes*. Kate is obsessed with death by water to the point of madness, and indeed drowns herself. Annie Anderson, as a child, is overwhelmed by fear when the school room floods after heavy rain: '[s]he could not tell what might be sweeping about in that filthy whirlpool'; she stands crying by the flood until Alec Forbes carries her out of the schoolroom to safety (I, 69). Later, in the Glamerton flood, as Annie sits in the rising waters in blind Tibbie Dyster's cottage, trying vainly to save the old woman from drowning, she ascribes the river water with almost personal agency. As she sits 'half-covered' in flood water, '[s]omething struck her gently on the arm, and kept bobbing against her. […] It was round and soft. She said to herself, "It's only somebody's heid that the water's torn aff"' (II, 292, 293). That she later finds it to be 'a drowned hen' (II, 293) seems incidental: the flood water is personal, vicious, and powerful, a monster that can tear off people's heads as well as drown them; it can kill in an animal or, indeed, a human way.

As well as Kate and Annie, Alec Forbes suffers fear of water. When he realises that Annie is trapped in the flood, he is seized not with unthinking heroism, but with fear of drowning: 'That was a terrible water to look at. And the boat was small' (II, 284). The narrator explains that '[t]he terrors of the night had returned upon Alec'; his fear of water becomes a nightmare of damnation (II, 284). The water itself appears to him not simply a natural force but a gateway to hell. The boat he builds to control his environment, to encounter the river but not to cross it, is poor protection against the actual reality of death. Alec, of course, does risk the flood and saves Annie – a sequence clearly foreshadowed when he saves her from the small flood in the school house. But his fear of water persists, as does his fascination with death by drowning. This fear, emerging from his fascination with the wild landscape beyond the Glamour, carries itself with him to Aberdeen, where he was an undergraduate. The fear manifests itself – or shapes his way of seeing – on the Links. Unsuccessful in his courtship of Kate, Alec begins to

[35] MacDonald, 'A Journey Rejourneyed', *The Argosy* (1865), 58. Further citation given in the text.

take long heartbroken rambles around the Links, trying to take comfort in the turmoil of the sea.[36]

> It was a desolate shore along which he walked. Two miles of sand lay by the lip of the sea on his right. On his left rose irregular and changeful mounds of dry sand, upon which grew coarse grass and a few unpleasant-looking plants. From the level of the tops of these mounds stretched a way a broad expanse of flat, uncultivated ground, covered with thin grass. (III, 2–3)

Alec wanders by the midwinter sea alone as he wandered by the midsummer river with Kate. As with the peat-bog, the description emphasises both the strictly realistic and the sharply symbolic. The 'irregular and changeful' nature of the dunes suggest the turmoil in Alec's heart – not only because of his jilted love-affair, but because he is a young man standing on the cusp of adulthood. The familiar landscapes of home and university have become no longer a safe harbour for him, but rather as unstable and shifting as the sea itself; he inhabits a liminal landscape, solid earth that moves like waves, the way he inhabits a liminal age and shape of mind. The water in this landscape moves towards him with the same inexorable force that time and his adulthood are moving towards him; as he lies on the shore, indulging his melancholy on this border between settled and unsettled landscapes, the tame and the wild, he find himself at the mercy of the tide:

> Suddenly something cold seemed to grasp him by the feet. He started and rose. Like a wild beast in the night, the tide had crept up upon him. A horror seized him, as if the ocean were indeed a slimy monster that sought to devour him where he lay alone and wretched. He sprang up the sand before him and, sliding back at every step, gained the top with difficulty, and ran across the *links* towards the city. (III, 3–4)

The sea too is transformed into a mythical creature; the turn of time and tide is transmuted into a ferocious, predatory *thing*, falling upon a vulnerable wanderer. Alec's misery is made physical by this unstable, liminal landscape; he finds himself surrounded and pulled in by the threat of the unknown—in this case, of maturation, of accepting the reality both of his adulthood and of

[36] Whether this detail is autobiographical is anyone's guess.

bereavement. He will outgrow his boyish crush on Kate, true, but Kate will die tragically young, throwing herself into the sea (III, 144–5).

All three of the central young people in *Alec Forbes* – Annie, Alec, and Kate – share this fascination with death by water; all three, in their own way, need to cross water out of their safe home landscapes and into the wild in order to reach adulthood. Kate, of course, does not make a good crossing; Annie almost drowns, but keeps herself alive until rescue (II, 103-104). Alec himself becomes a ship's doctor, and sets out to sea, voyaging into the wild landscape of the Arctic:

> The [ship] lay a frozen mass, changed by the might of the winds and the snow and the frost into the grotesque ice phantom of a ship, through which, the winter long, the winds would go whistling and raving, crowding up it the snow and the crystal icicles, all in the wild waste of the desert north, with no ear to ear the sadness, and no eye to behold the deathly beauty. (III, 265)

The transformation of the ship, and of Alec's ordeal surviving the snowbound wastes of the north, is the culmination of his journey towards adulthood; his bereavement at Kate's death, his loneliness, and, ultimately, his loss of the former security of the home landscape of Glamerton, are given harsh physical reality. When he returns home from the wreck of the ship, after Annie has already given him up for lost, he appears abruptly and unexpectedly on a night when 'an odd-looking figure' amid '[l]ow swells of peat ground, the burial places of old forests', on a night when '[t]he moon was high and full' (III, 277). He returns from the sea into a wild landscape akin to the source of the Glamour, like a man who'd escaped the home of the fairies. By crossing liminal spaces into the wild, and returning, Alec steps into his full adulthood; he and Annie are able to return, 'wise and sadder', to the security of the home they had lost.

'Do take me up an Alp'

If, as suggested earlier, landscape is a way of reading, then it is worth considering what effect, if any, George MacDonald hoped that stories about characters shaped by landscape would have on his readers. Nor, to prove this, do we need to delve simply into his critical writings. MacDonald's little-known travel narrative 'A Journey Rejourneyed', directly contemporaneous to *Alec Forbes,* recounts the experiences of several young women who cannot afford to travel, but who are able to get out into an exotic, transformative landscape

by listening to their friends' stories. The landscape they experience is portrayed as literary in nature, being that most stereotypical Romantic landscape, the Swiss Alps. Wordsworth famously used his crossing of the Alps – or missed crossing, rather – as a meditation on the nature of the imagination, in Book VI of *The Prelude* (1805, 1850); Percy Shelley, in 'Mont Blanc' (1817) wrote something similar about his own travels, according to his own lights. In 1865, MacDonald himself went on a walking tour of the Swiss Alps, funded by the gift of a friend.[37] Upon his return, he wrote a striking if obscure short story, 'A Journey Rejourneyed', published in *Argosy* as two parts in December 1865 and January 1866. The landscape of the Alps, then, for MacDonald, was first encountered literarily, through the poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley, and others; then kinaesthetically, as a landscape in which he is physically present; and then transmuted once again into literature, this time his own work. So it is a landscape he encounters through reading, seeing, and writing alike. As such, it provides a striking text to examine the way in which MacDonald took his idiosyncratically mystical ideas about Nature on to a characteristically Romantic landscape, so – especially since it is widely neglected unfamiliar – it will be considered it in some depth.

'A Journey Rejourneyed' is, most simply, a lightly fictionalised account of MacDonald's walking tour of the Alps, with the role of MacDonald filled by the character James Bayley. Portions of the story, indeed, are copied from his own records of his journey. For instance, when James Bayley declares: 'I hate the photographs. They convey no idea but of extreme outline. The tints, and the lines, and the vapours, and the mingling, and the infinitude, and the loftiness, and the glaciers, and the slow-crawling avalanches cannot be represented' (350), the phrasing is almost identical to a letter MacDonald sent to Louisa from Switzerland.[38] Certainly there is a sensible literary thriftiness to this; returning with a mass of letters about the Alps, it makes sense that MacDonald would revise and reorder them into a publishable travel narrative. And in what seems like a knowing in-joke for MacDonald's family, after James

[37] Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London, 1924), 347ff.

[38] For which see Glenn Edward Sadler, ed., *An Expression of Character: The Letters of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids, 1994), 149:

> 'I hate the photographs, they convey *no* idea. The tints and the lines and the mass and the streams and the vapours, and the mingling, and the infinitude, and the loftiness, the glaciers and the slow crawling avalanches—they cannot be described.' It seems possible that further comparison of the story to MacDonald's letters and notebooks would reveal that much if not most of it was written as a personal account of his own travels while in Switzerland.

Bayley utters this passage, one of the sisters remarks, 'Isn't it like a book, to hear him talk?' (55)

The story, however, is told not by James Bayley, but by Jane, an early-adolescent girl; the conceit of the story is that she is writing letter to the editor recounting a story that James Bayley told her and her sisters. It is a cast of characters which George MacDonald evidently enjoyed, and which he used again as the frame for 'The Fairy Fleet', published in *Argosy* in 1866, and later adapted as 'The Carasoyn'. Jane is among the most delightful characters in MacDonald's fiction: intelligent, articulate, and inquisitive, but occasionally gloomy and self-contradictory, she assumes a brusque professionalism that rapidly deteriorates into her own inquisitive chatter. She is an effervescent character, at times both lyrical and petty, and clearly patterned off of MacDonald's own oldest daughters, who were about Jane's age at the time. She introduces herself thus:

> My name is Jane. At least that is what I choose to call myself. I want to tell anybody who will listen, what a friend of our family, James Bayley—that is what I choose to call him—told us. I think people will care for it, because it made my sister Lizzie sleep all night with a smile on the face which constant pain makes so white. (53)

Jane's father is dead, so she and her sister Maria work as tutors to help their mother provide for Lizzie, who is dying from a lingering illness. Jane's life, then, is centred around her sister's health and her family's poverty. She explains, 'Even in these days of running to and fro, we cannot manage to leave home, at least not often, and never to a greater distance than Hastings. Brighton none of us like' (53). She is restless but attempting to put a bold face on an anxious, confining situation. She explains:

> When I am tramping through the wet in a day like this, with goloshes and an umbrella, thinking of the dreary two hours I shall have to spend with the Miss Drontheims—not dreary because I have to teach, but dreary because I have to teach *them*—I say to myself, "This is one of my dreams, in which I go tramping and teaching; but I shall wake in my own home with the teak-kettle singing on the hob, and the firelight playing on the curtains of Lizzie's bed. Think of that, Jane," I say to myself, "and do your work as well as ever you can, that you may wake with a good conscience." (53)

Even in this flight of cathartic fancy, Jane does not reimagine her home any differently than they are now, or even imagine her sister well again; she holds the fragile situation of her present state as an ideal of home. The reference to dreaming helps destabilise both the continuity and the reliability of the narrative; as she is choosing to call herself Jane and choosing to call her family friend James Bayley—note that the emphasis on choice undermines factuality—so she chooses to believe her suffering is only temporary. Jane is generally upbeat and optimistic, but it takes very little imagination for the reader to recognise both the hardship of her life, and her fear for her sister's well-being. It is a not insignificant detail that in her dream of waking to a secure home, her sister is still alive.

Lizzie also relies on dreaming to escape the confines of her bed, remarking, '[d]o you know, I think I have dreams given to me at night just because I cannot go out and see things' (58). Similarly, when James Bayley comes to visit, she demands, '[d]o take me up an Alp […] I am so tired of lying here all day. I climb Alps sometimes at night; but I want to go up one awake, with a hold of you, James.' So in order to create a waking dream – an illusion of health and activity for a terminally ill child – James Bayley tells her a story.

This is the frame in which MacDonald offers a travel narrative about his own visit to the Alps. And, as he has subsumed Wordsworth's 'Evening Voluntary' into spiritual awakening of an adolescent girl, so here, too, he subsumes the Romantic landscape of the Alps into catharsis for a family of sisters. There is perhaps a biographical reason for this: 'A Journey Rejourneyed' may well be derived from MacDonald's own experience of talking about his travel with his daughters. But there is also a distinct aesthetic reason, derived from the mystical understanding that MacDonald had of landscape and poetry. MacDonald's emphasis in describing the Alps is not on factual, mimetic representation of the Alps, nor on Romantic musings on individual inspiration, but on the spiritual insight the act of reading about a landscape will provide for his readers.

To this end, MacDonald creates yet another layer of destabilisation in the narrative. Jane insists that she must faithfully record everything James said, but the reader is allowed to doubt that she heard correctly: notably, she recalls that 'when [James Bayley] got his holiday, he went to Switzerland, and thanked God on top of the Sneezer—I think that is what he called it' (54). The physical landscape of the Alps as James Bayley actually saw it distorted through its double-transformation into narrative: the account that he told is changed as Jane hears it, and she then recounts her own variant as circumscribed by

her limited knowledge of the world. It is not clear how much, if any, of the remaining narrative is faithful to James Bayley's own words, or faithful instead to Jane's possibly confused memory of them. This landscape, Jane herself begins the narrative with a lament at her inability to remember James Bayley's stories with any accuracy:

> Some ancestor of his must have been a magician or a necromancer or something of that sort; for with a few words, flung out anyhow, he can make you see such things! Oh! I can never tell them so that you will see them as I saw them; yet I must try. […] What a pity it is that his words must be withered and shrunk like fallen leaves, by being blown and tossed about in my mind! (53)

Paradoxically, even as Jane laments her faulty memory, MacDonald elevates her to the equal of Dante. There is a clear allusion in this passage to the final canto of the *Paradiso*, at the precise moment when Dante finally receives the beatific vision. Comparing himself to *'colüi che sognando vede, | che dopo 'l sogno la passione impressa | rimane,*[39] Dante declares:

> *Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio*
> *che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede,*
> *e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio. […]*
>
> *Così la neve al sol si disigilla;*
> *così al vento ne le foglie levi*
> *si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.*[40]

James Bayley becomes analogous with the Sybil, his stories with divinely inspired utterances, and Jane with the Dantean poet-pilgrim on the cusp of

---

[39] *Paradiso,* XXXIII. 58-60: 'the dreamer, after he awakens, | still stirred by feelings that the dream evoked' (Hollander's translation).

[40] *Paradiso,* XXXIII. 55-57, 64–66:
From that time on my power of sight exceeded
that of speech, which fails at such a vision,
as memory fails at such abundance. […]
Thus the sun unseals an imprint on the snow:
Thus the Sibyl's oracles, on weightless leaves,
lifted by the wind, were swept away
(Hollander's translation)

apprehending '*somma luce che tanto ti levi | da' concetti mortali*'.[41] If this seems rather a grandiose ambition for travel writing, recall Jakob Böhme's assertion that the Holy Spirit 'is in God, and also in the whole Nature' which is 'the *whole Body* or *Corpus* of God'.[42] In other words, the Holy Spirit shows the nature of God in Nature. When James Bayley is describing the Alps, he is quite literally describing God; when Jane sees the Alps through his narrative, she is seeing 'the Light inexpressible' as clearly as Dante did. For MacDonald, then, because landscape is a way of seeing the world, rightly construed it is a way of seeing God, because the world, ruled by the Holy Spirit, comes from and returns to God. The description of a specific landscape, then, should be such that it evokes in the readers that attentiveness needed so they can see the Trinity in nature for themselves. In this sense, MacDonald seems to hope that his descriptions of landscape will be like St Bernard guiding Dante's gaze to the Divine Light:

> *Bernardo m'accennava, e sorridea,*
> *perch' io guardassi suso; ma io era*
> *già per me stesso tal qual ei volea,*[43]

The literary landscape creates this response in the reader: of their own initiative and impulse, they are able to receive the whole Nature of God in the whole of Nature.

This is evident at the climax of 'A Journey Rejourneyed', when James Bayley describes his first sight of the Wetterhorn. The passage is both striking and little-known, so it is worth quoting at length:

> "A steep green slope, which we first scrambled up and then rode along; the first of a shower; big cattle, each with its big bell on a broad belt round its neck, glooming through the rain; faster and faster descent of rain-drops; the water running into my boots; steeper and steeper descents; fog, through which nothing but the nearest objects can be seen; a more level spot of grass, with rock sticking through it in

[41] *Paradiso,* XXXIII. 67–8: '[…] Light exalted above mortal thought' (Hollander's translation).

[42] Jakob Böhme and William Law, II, 28, II.15, 17–19

[43] *Paradiso,* XXXIII. 49-51
With his smile, Bernard signalled
that I look upward, but of my own accord
I was already doing what he wished
(Hollander's translation).

> every direction, and haggard old fir-trees standing half dead about a stream running over the rockiest of channels and down the steepest of descents not to be a succession of waterfalls, banked everywhere by this green grass—the whole making up one of the two places I saw where I would build a house;—singing women; a glass of brandy at a roadside inn; the Eiger hanging over us through the fog, fearfully high and fearfully overhanging, like nothing I can think of but Mount Sinai in the *Pilgrim's Progress;* a scrambling down of rocky stairs; and then, through the mist, that for which I have brought you all this way in the pouring rain—the sharp-edged, all but perpendicular outline of the Wetter-horn, close in front of our faces—nothing but a faint mass and a clear edge—the most frightful appearance by far we have yet seen. I would not for a month's sunshine have lost that sight. If I could draw at all, nothing would be easier than to let you see it, as it rushed form the earth through the mist into the sky. A single line, varying in direction, yet the effect is nearly perpendicular, seen through a grey mist—that is all. And all I can say is, *It was terrible;* and there is little good in saying anything, except your saying is your friend's seeing."
>
> "I see it," each of us cried. (128–9)

This description is genuinely remarkable. Most of it consists of a fragmented single sentence, conveying a series of distinct images rather than a connected narrative. The reference to *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), too, gives these images spiritual significance: the walkers pass under Law in the form of the grim Mount Sinai, to receive grace in a glimpse of the mountain of paradise. And here, again, is the correlation between describing landscape and painting landscape. There is the lament for drawing ability, of course, but the actual description of the Alp itself is drawn largely from John Ruskin's analysis of J. M. W. Turner. In the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843), Ruskin offers this assessment of Turner's studies of Arona:

> It is totally impossible here to say which way the light falls on the distant hills, except by the slightly increased decision of their edges turned towards it, but the greatest attention is paid to get these edges decisive, yet full of gradation, and perfectly true in character of form. All the rest of the mountain is then undistinguishable haze […][44]

[44] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters Volume I Containing Parts I and II of General Principles and of Truth* (London, 1903), 441.

This corresponds exactly to MacDonald's description of the Wetterhorn as 'nothing but a faint mass and a clear edge'. Ruskin, indeed, goes on to 'particularly insist upon this sharpness of edge, because it is not a casual or changeful habit of nature; it is the unfailing characteristic of all very great distances.'[45] Turner's use of edge, then, creates 'the impression […] of mountains too far off to be ever distinctly seen, rendered clear by brilliancy of light and purity of atmosphere; and the effect, consequently, [is] vastness of space with intensity of light and crystalline transparency of air.'[46] Now this is a text that MacDonald certainly knew, being personal friends with Ruskin, who gave a him copy of *Modern Painters* in 1864.[47] And it is easy to see how Ruskin's ostensibly visual argument would seize on MacDonald's mystically-inclined imagination, the 'intensity of light' connecting with '*somma luce che tanto ti levi | da' concetti mortali*'.[48] To present this connection, then, MacDonald translates his own physical experience of walking the Alps into a literary experience, based on the Alpine landscape of English Romanticism but employing Ruskin's painterly theory about how the Alps should be portrayed. This combination of physical, poetic, and painterly landscape is then mediated through the narration of an adolescent girl, to relate a spiritual awakening she and her sisters have, the story about the Alps becoming, in essence, a vision of the divine.

'I give it up'

If landscape is a way of seeing the world, MacDonald specifically presents it as a way of seeing the Divine. Scotland appears both as a beloved home and a haunted wilderness; venturing outside of the home landscape into the wild becomes emblematic of maturation. George MacDonald's Scotland, with its Aberdeenshire landscapes of straths, peat-bogs, links, and shore, reflects the inner life of his characters; these peculiarly Scottish spaces shape whoever they become, individually and spiritually.

In a curious aside in *Robert Falconer*, the narrator suggests that 'If the writer has any higher purpose than the amusement of other boys, he will find the life of a country boy richer for his ends than that of a town boy.'[49] This is largely

[45] Ibid., 442.

[46] Ibid., 441–2.

[47] Greville Macdonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 328ff. Another way into this topic is, indeed, through Ruskin, whose importance to the Victorian novel as an art form is perhaps too frequently overlooked.

[48] *Paradiso* XXXIII. 67–8: '[…] Light exalted above mortal thought' (Hollander's translation).

[49] George MacDonald, *Robert Falconer* (London, 1868), I, 216.

because, the narrator says, country boys are more susceptible to the revelatory influences of nature; they go outdoors and experience their maturation, developing 'a tenderer feeling of [Nature's] feminality' – they fall in love with the landscape, as it were. Town boys, by contrast, get their education largely from reading, and even read too much: 'Town boys have too many books and pictures. They see nature in mirrors, – invaluable privilege *after they know herself, not before*. They have greater opportunity of observing human nature; but here also *the books* are too many and various.'[50]

But precisely when the eager critic looks to identify real aesthetic motherlode for MacDonald's fiction, the narrator undercuts it: '[b]ut I must stop, for I am getting up to the neck in a bog of discrimination. As if I did not know the nobility of some towns-people, compared with the worldliness of some country folk! I give it up.'[51] Here, yet again, is a clueless narrator, fumbling to philosophise as the author slyly suggests the fact of the matter: the book in the reader's hands is one such potentially distorting mirror of Nature, and the reader is most likely a bookish town-dweller rather than an active country lad. The literary landscape and the adventures of the characters thus reflect to the attentive reader what is actually physically possible, whether for outdoor games to be played or the awakening of the spirit through contemplation of the Nature. In this sense, the book invites the reader to set it down and step outside.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses his gratitude for the generous funding provided by the Shantou University Scientific Research Initiation Grant and the Shantou University Liberal Arts Research Project Fund, which made the successful completion of this research possible. Thanks, also, are due to the University of Aberdeen for providing both motive and opportunity to undertake the project. Rebecca Langworthy and Derek Stewart gave able and generous editorial support. Chen Yingshi provided indefatigable research assistance; Alessandro Simeone advised on the Italian.

Shantou University, China

[50] Ibid., 216–17. Emphasis in original.

[51] Ibid., 217.