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MacDonald's Northern Voice

David Robb

Although of different generations and very different writers, George MacDonald and Robert Louis Stevenson were not only aware of each other's writings but held each other in high esteem.[1] Stevenson's most interesting reference to MacDonald comes in the Preface to his 1887 collection of poetry, *Underwoods*. Referring to the poems in Scots in the volume, Stevenson apologises for their lack of dialect purity: he is simply writing Scots speech as it comes to him, he says, without any attempt at reproducing the distinctive speech of any one of Scotland's districts. As he writes:

> I note again, that among our new dialecticians, the local habitat of every dialect is given to the square mile. I could not emulate this nicety if I desired; for I simply wrote my Scots as well as I was able, not caring if it hailed from Lauderdale or Angus, from the Mearns or Galloway […] And if [my speech] be not pure, alas! what matters it? The day draws near when this illustrious and malleable tongue shall be quite forgotten; and Burns' Ayrshire, and Dr Macdonald's Aberdeen-awa', and Scott's brave, metropolitan utterance will be all equally the ghosts of speech.[2]

There may now be some surprise in finding the largely forgotten MacDonald coupled with Burns and Scott. MacDonald, of course, was still a contemporary of Stevenson's in 1887, and there is real respect in that 'Dr Macdonald', apparently one of the last in a line of prominent, locally-nourished Scottish writers. Stevenson was sensing how the distinctiveness of Scotland and Scottishness was fading as the United Kingdom grew ever more unified.

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[1] William Gray, '"Amiable Infidelity," "Grim-Faced Dummies," and Rondels: Robert Louis Stevenson on George MacDonald', *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, vol. 23 (2004), 21–26. I am grateful to Professor Sharin Faith Schroeder for this reference. As regards MacDonald's awareness of Stevenson, see my article 'George MacDonald's Scottish Novels: Three Notes', *Notes and Queries*, new series, vol. 33, no. 2 (June 1986), 174–77.

[2] R. L. Stevenson, *Underwoods* (London, 1895), xi–xii.

Stevenson's own writing, one could argue, illustrates this loss: it is hard to feel that, as a whole, it is quite as rooted in a Scottish world as those of the writers he mentions. Stevenson, of course, produced great literary treatments of Scotland. Yet one feels that he turned periodically to Scotland in much the same way as he turned, prompted by other inspirations, to the South Seas, or the streets of London, or rural France, or to an island of pirate treasure. Compare this with Scott, whose Scottish Waverley Novels emerge from an emotional and intellectual life focused on Scotland to a far greater extent than Stevenson could claim. Compare it too with Burns, and with James Hogg: their most distinctive work is totally at one with the rural peasant worlds which created them. And compare it with MacDonald, whose best Scottish work not only draws upon and evokes the distinctive regional environment in which he was brought up, but makes of his own Scotland a literary experience from which special imaginative, spiritual and religious truths emerge. MacDonald's Scotland, as I have long argued, is a region with links to fairyland.[3]

The phrase 'Aberdeen-awa" refers both to the characteristic speech of the North-East but also to the region itself. Stevenson is contemplating the way in which older generations of Scottish writers drew upon and reflected a Scotland which had been made up of a marked variety of regions, the diversity of which had made Scotland seem larger than its population or land-mass would suggest. So when we think of 'MacDonald and Scotland', we are essentially thinking of two Scotlands. One is Scotland as a whole. The other is the distinctive MacDonald world of 'Aberdeen-awa", the large corner of north-east Scotland from which he hailed, and which formed the basis of his Scottish novels with both their geographical particularity and their otherworldly, fairy-tale leanings. Each contributes to the range of effects and meanings we find in his work and different audiences respond in their own ways to what he offers. Stevenson and many other Scots will have been conscious of the distinctive Buchan north-east when they read him. To non-Scottish readers, however, these works must simply depict, in the main, 'Scotland'. That said, there was clearly a realisation among non-Scottish readers that MacDonald's regional distinctiveness was having at least one effect, namely an encounter with a flavour of Scots dialogue which differed from, for example, Walter Scott's and which they saw as more provincial, more alien and simply less comfortable to read than they liked. Judging from

[3] David Robb, `George MacDonald's Aberdeenshire Fairytale' in H. W. Drescher and J. Schwend (eds), *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Nineteenth Century* (Frankfurt, 1985), 205–15.

early reviews, it was for many of them a speech which came from simply too far north.[4]

So it seems appropriate to consider MacDonald's writings both with respect to the idea of Scotland as a whole, and also to think about his northern, Aberdeenshire origins and their reflection in his novels. His first novel-length Scottish statement was *David Elginbrod* in 1863. Its strange design, with its tale of the inexperienced student who draws enough support from his encounter with the pious Elginbrod family in their northern rural backwater to enable him to survive the improbably gothic perils of life in England, reveals much about MacDonald's instincts regarding what he felt he should be writing about. In his fiction he utilises his Scottish origins to colour and add weight to his religious vision. As I have argued before, he knew that his English contemporaries regarded Scotland as a land of peculiar piety — a land which took its Christianity with especial seriousness, at times impressive, at times ridiculous and always stubborn in its beliefs and behaviour.[5] The traditional impression of Scottish religious life, from the eighteenth century onwards in particular, had seen it as peculiarly austere – dominating and colouring the national life and character. MacDonald's own sardonic summing up of this comes with reference to the character of David Elginbrod: 'few suspected him of being religious beyond the degree which is commonly supposed to be the general inheritance of Scotchmen, possibly in virtue of their being brought up upon oatmeal porridge and the Shorter Catechism'.[6] The Ten Year Conflict with its challenge to British parliamentary sovereignty and its spectacular outcome in the splitting of the Church of Scotland in 1843 had left its mark on the English consciousness, a process which attained a climax of sorts in 1861 with the publication of Henry Thomas Buckle's *On Scotland and the Scotch Intellect*. This famous attack on Scotland's religious history and its influence on Scottish life appeared just a couple of years before *David Elginbrod*, and when MacDonald seized upon the Martin Elginbrodde quatrain at a dinner at his publisher's, he clearly saw it as a Scottish expression of charity in theological thinking with which the nation was not being widely credited.[7]

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[4] Emma Letley, *From Galt to Douglas Brown: Nineteenth Century Fiction and Scots Language* (Edinburgh, 1988), 88–92. Hereafter 'Letley'.

[5] David Robb, 'George MacDonald and the Grave Livers of Scotland' in *Rethinking George MacDonald: Context and Contemporaries* (Glasgow, 2013), 273–89.

[6] George MacDonald, *David Elginbrod* (London: Hurst & Blackett, n.d.), 39. Hereafter '*DE*'

[7] Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London, 1924), 320–21. Hereafter 'GMDW'.

David Elginbrod, doubly disappearing from the book both as a result of the geographical direction taken by the plot and also by dying, is nevertheless seen as a spiritual force capable of overcoming distance and death, thanks to the soundness (in MacDonald's view) of his religious instincts. He embodies a distinctively Scottish religious strength and beneficial force within Victorian Britain, as does Robert Falconer — to a lesser extent in his minor appearance in this novel but to a very marked extent in the later novel named after him. Although Greville MacDonald believed that David's character was based on MacDonald's own father, it must also be seen as an embodiment of a national type: Scots speech has a substantial role in creating the character, and the deep and instinctive piety of the Elginbrod family fits the broad national stereotype, though with a far less forbidding twist than Buckle offered.[8] This is a national piety emerging from the grass-roots, rather than being imposed by the priestly caste which so repelled the English historian. Strong and humane religious instincts like David's are portrayed as the essence of Scottish life.

The possibility of a single figure embodying an essential Scottish stereotype was in the air, in any case. The historian Tom Devine points out that, in mid-century Scotland, 'the cult of national heroes […] remained an important link between the new Scotland and its national past' and that 'in the period after about 1840, Burns became a Scottish cultural icon and was celebrated as never before.'[9] And as Christopher Whatley has recently explained, the astonishing national and international celebration of the centenary of Burns's birth in 1859 cemented the world's identification of the poet as an embodiment of Scotland.[10] In communities across Scotland and the globe, events marking the birthday at the end of January proliferated, with a degree of popular public enthusiasm for the poet greater than had ever been seen before, and perhaps since. There were 676 publicly organised events in Scotland and even 76 in England. Others took place abroad, especially in the United States. The events of 1859 embodied a Scottish essence in one figure just a very few years before MacDonald wrote *David Elginbrod*. Admittedly, Hastings (where MacDonald was living at the time) does not seem to have marked the occasion, but Huntly certainly did, with a half-day holiday and an elaborate and prestigious ball in the evening.[11] Although the event is mentioned in neither of our two

[8] GMDW, 323.

[9] T. M. Devine, *Independence or Union: Scotland's Past and Scotland's Present* (London, 2017), 88–9.

[10] Christopher A. Whatley, *Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People* (Edinburgh, 2016), 76–92.

[11] James Ballantine, *Chronicle of the hundredth birthday of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh &

substantial biographies (Greville MacDonald's and William Raeper's), it seems inconceivable that MacDonald was unaware of the extent of the celebration of a poet he held in high regard, as the effectiveness of his lectures on Burns in America in 1872 and 1873 indicates. Other Scotsmen of the past and present were also seen as embodiments of Scotland, or at least of distinctive and important Scottish characteristics: Scott, of course, and Carlyle, and Thomas Chalmers immediately spring to mind. Yet the universality of the enthusiasm for Burns in 1859 — an appeal which crossed nations and social classes — was in a league of its own.

Burns was not necessarily seen by MacDonald as the ideal embodiment of Scottish life, and veneration of the poet was not universal. Facts and rumours about Burns's moral failings were widespread, and there was a particular tendency among clergymen and people of an evangelical persuasion to reject the prevailing enthusiasm. In particular, Burns's apparent love of the bottle was seen as a flaw fatal to any claim that he could be a Scottish role model. MacDonald's stance on all this is summed up briefly by Greville in his account of his father's American lectures. It was typical of the age that MacDonald's emphasis was not so much on Burns's works themselves — close literary criticism would belong to a later period — but on the personage of the poet. MacDonald used the poems primarily as illustrations for a biographical account:

> Without notes or help other than a little volume of Burns's works, he set the man before them, the lover, the romantic ploughman, the poet, in true portraiture, while his sins and shortcomings were fully accredited to him. (GMDW, 424)

Louisa MacDonald, in a letter home from Chicago, was succinct in her account of 'the fortieth lecture I have heard on that poor but talented genius! The long and short of which is that "he did as well as he could, but he might have done better" – like the French master's verdict on his scholars leaving school'.[12] William Raeper's summary of the first lecture suggests that MacDonald balanced honesty with an endearing idealism as he explained Burns's drouthiness: 'He was a natural man of the soil, and though he drank (it was true), he did so only for the company and not for the drink.'[13]

London, 1859), 277–8.

[12] GMDW, 454.

[13] William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring, 1987), 290.

The fact that Burns was the topic MacDonald found himself lecturing upon most frequently in America was due, to a considerable extent, to the popularity of the poet in that country at that time, a popularity which would result, in the 1870s, in the commission of a statue of Burns for New York's Central Park. This was installed in 1880, the same year as a copy of the same statue was unveiled in Dundee, and it was one of the first statues of Burns to be erected anywhere outside Scotland. That Burns was the topic most in demand from MacDonald suggests, however, that not only was Burns greatly liked by the Americans but also that he was being seen as the most desirable topic for a Scottish lecturer: MacDonald seemed to be lecturing little, if at all, on the other apparently obvious Scottish literary topic, Walter Scott.

All of which, arguably, throws light on MacDonald's move into writing Scottish fiction, in which the creation of the character after whom the first novel is named seems to have been crucial. David Elginbrod is no practising poet, but his nature is so completely in accord with MacDonald's conception of the ideal man that poetry has a natural appeal for him. He enjoys and understands poetry quite instinctively. Hugh Sutherland introduces him and his family to important new poetic experiences in the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Previous to this, David had encountered Milton whose works had only a mixed appeal, and Burns whom he already knows and reveres as a natural part of his Scottish existence.

David can be seen in two ways. He is the first of several characters, in MacDonald's novels, to embody what Scotland, at its best, can offer the world. We might see him as MacDonald's answer to the installation of Burns, during the centenary a few years earlier, as the quintessence of Scotland. After all, Burns apparently did as well as he could, but he might have done better — and David Elginbrod is a version of that possible superior Scottish distinctiveness. The challenge to Burns is not too close – David Elginbrod is no mere parody of the poet. But he is, like Burns, a man of unusual capacity emerging from an obscure part of the Scottish rural scene, and he is associated with the plough by the quotation from Chaucer which MacDonald added to the title-page of the novel's first book, 'Turriepuffit'. (Burns, of course, was universally seen as the ploughman poet.)

At the same time, however, this is the first of a series of novels in which MacDonald variously projects himself, in a sequence of guises. The autobiographical echoes in Hugh Sutherland, Alec Forbes and Robert Falconer is always clear and does not depend solely upon the fact that, in their stories, they emerge from MacDonald's own part of Scotland. Their progress through

life's challenges, after their early years in the world in which MacDonald himself was formed, shadows, however distantly, the shape of his own life story. But *David Elginbrod* is a first novel, and like many another first novel is likely to be particularly autobiographical. Is it going too far to see *both* David and Hugh as embodiments of facets of MacDonald's own being, so that the older character, as well as the young student, reflects the author? If Hugh Sutherland is the scholar and aesthete who swiftly leaves behind the Scottish world which bore him, to encounter like MacDonald love and adventures in England, David Elginbrod can be considered as the embodiment of the powerful and natural religious instincts which MacDonald felt within himself and saw as partly derived from his family and community. David's being is a counterpart to MacDonald's own. If David in his northern roughness is an alternative Scottish ideal to the Burns so lauded in 1859, so then is MacDonald himself, with his mission to communicate an important religious message. However much of the gentle and strong personality of David Elginbrod was derived from MacDonald Senior, David's eloquent, personal and freshly unorthodox religious ideas, focused on the essential concept of God as a loving father, is derived from MacDonald himself: the author's father, for all his goodness, is never credited with such revolutionary views.

The pattern established in this first novel, of special Scottish strength and insight intervening from afar in the complexities and dangers of Victorian Britain, recurs in several later works. In *Robert Falconer* (1868) the move from Scotland to London is prompted by the hero's need to find and save his father but, in the process, he becomes a major force for good in the slums of the capital. Rescue, too, is the motivation for Malcolm McPhail, the Marquis of Lossie, venturing south to save the headstrong Florimel from herself in the 1877 novel of that name. *The Marquis of Lossie* also contains another example of the benefits to London of some Scottish expatriate missionary work in the form of Malcolm's old school-teacher, ejected from his living in the north, preaching to the downtrodden in a mid-week prayer meeting in an obscure dissenting chapel. In cases like these, Scotland is seen as having something valuable to give to the world of the majority of MacDonald's readers.

MacDonald's Scotland, however, is also MacDonald's Aberdeenshire: his English readers may or may not have been familiar with the phrase, but the world of 'Aberdeen-awa' makes its own distinctive contribution. MacDonald's North-East does not emerge properly until his second novel, *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865). The Scottish world of *David Elginbrod* lacks the geographical fullness and precision of the novels of the later 1860s and 1870s. Nevertheless,

it is made up of a small handful of elements which together gesture towards Scotland's north-eastern corner, but which do not emerge as a precise regional world as we read.

These fragments from the far North-East are varied enough, admittedly. For example, the trees of the fir-wood, beloved of Margaret Elginbrod, are Douglas firs, introduced from North America in 1827 by a Scotsman and a rapidly established feature of the northern Scottish landscape. Their shape, of course, is conical: they point heavenward like cathedral spires, seeking the light – hence, perhaps, their appeal to Margaret and her author? The name 'Turriepuffit' appears on no map: perhaps it hints at a root in 'Turriff', but given a further twist to make it seem more 'Scotch' to southern readers. Hugh Sutherland is a student at, specifically, 'one of the Aberdeen Universities' (*DE*, p. 8) and clearly MacDonald is consciously writing about the Aberdeen he knew as a student in the 1840s: King's College and Marischal College were merged to form the University of Aberdeen in 1860, a year or so before the novel was written. David's position on the estate of Turriepuffit is that of a grieve, translated for English readers as 'bailiff': MacDonald is envisaging a farming arrangement of a type he was familiar with from his Huntly days. Turriepuffit is open to winter weather of a northern severity which could be life-threatening, hence the heroic rescue of Margaret by Hugh. And there is always the issue of the 'northern' dialect speech which so disconcerted early readers and reviewers — not that it seems particularly opaque by the standards of *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk*, let alone as lyrically developed as the speech of *Sunset Song*. Yet there is a fair bit of Aberdeen-awa in *David Elginbrod*.

But it was with *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865) that MacDonald first sketched the North-East world of his youth with anything like fullness, and it was as if a creative watershed had been crossed. His confidence and pleasure in creating something like a realist novel is clear in the book, hence the extensiveness and thoroughness with which he recreates the Huntly world of his memory. Compared with the isolated Turriepuffit of *David Elginbrod*, the landscape of *Alec Forbes* feels extensive, peopled and complete. Indeed, one can use it and its successor *Robert Falconer* as a primitive guide book to Huntly and its surroundings to this day.

We can feel MacDonald's confidence as he finds that the realist novel could be used as a medium for much that he wanted to say: poetry and dream-fantasy were not the only modes which could accommodate his vision. It is surely no coincidence that his best non-fantasy fictions – in my opinion, *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, *Robert Falconer* and *Malcolm* (1875) – are the ones most

securely and extensively located in areas thoroughly familiar to him (Huntly and its surroundings, and Cullen on the coast to the north). The first two are set in the scenes in which he was brought up, while the third benefited, as Greville tells us, from a special trip to the Moray Firth coast in autumn 1873 with the specific goal of setting the novel there and refreshing his memory.[14] These locations make a substantial contribution to the appeal of these books, not solely because the solidity of their landscapes brings them close to our expectations of a proper, realist novel. These, surely, along with *Sir Gibbie*, offer MacDonald the best chance of a lasting place in the nineteenth-century novel of Scottish life, and are the ones based most securely on the Scottish actuality with which he was most familiar. Truth, it would seem, could still emerge from the Scottish North-East.

Sir Gibbie (1879), however, is a slightly different case. It has a degree of unreality which the three other novels lack, despite its being vividly grounded in the slums of Victorian Aberdeen. The novel's 'Widdiehill' is the Gallowgate, a street MacDonald would have known well as he journeyed from his student lodgings in Old Aberdeen to the city centre, the harbour and other locations. He certainly got as far as Ferryhill and Torry, as he makes Gibbie flee to 'the lofty chain-bridge over the river Daur' – this is obviously the still-standing Wellington Suspension Bridge, opened in 1830. The novel also makes it clear that he was familiar with Rubislaw Quarry and the harbour. And he will have been as familiar with the city's squalor as he was with its landmarks – the Burns scholar Thomas Crawford, of Aberdeen University, once said to me that *Sir Gibbie* offered the best fictional account he knew of a Victorian Scottish city. But as Gibbie flees westwards '*up Daurside*', the locations become more vague, although MacDonald clearly knew that the River Dee emerges from a thoroughly mountainous region. Is 'Glashgar' modelled, in name at least, on Lochnagar? There is little else in the novel which might make us think of anywhere specific in the valley of the Dee.

Sir Gibbie remained one of the most fondly remembered, and most consistently read, of MacDonald's Scottish novels, well into the twentieth century, at least among an older generation of readers. It was a novel which combined various unexpected elements: the vividness of the slums of Aberdeen, its unpredictable relocation to a part of Scotland which MacDonald had not evoked before, and above all the strangeness of its central figure, the dumb but Christ-like Gibbie. It has a hidden strength, too, in that it would

[14] GMDW, 466.

appear to be based on one of the stories of James Hogg, his constant source of literary pleasure and inspiration. The influence of Hogg on MacDonald is a subject in itself, and we can be in no doubt of the special place the earlier poet and tale-teller had in MacDonald' personal pantheon: the famous evocation of Hogg's poem 'Kilmeny' in *At the Back of the North Wind* is its clearest illustration, but throughout his fiction references to the Ettrick Shepherd's tales are liable to be found whenever a young character's worthwhile reading material is listed. In Hogg's *Winter Evening Tales* (1820) we find the story entitled 'Duncan Campbell'.[15] It tells of a six-year-old Highland lad, separated from his widowed father when he is sent to Edinburgh to live with an elderly aunt and to be educated, who is so shocked by the sudden sight of his aunt's corpse on its deathbed that he flees, panic-stricken, to the far outskirts of the city. Separated from all caring adults, he wanders the countryside for several years until he is taken in by a loving farming family. Eventually, by the accidental arrival of two highland women trading domestic goods for lowland wool, Duncan's true origins and family are revealed, and he returns to the northern house of his father and regains his rightful place in society — which enables him to aid in turn the loving friends who had sustained him, rescuing them from poverty and marrying their daughter. The general identity of outline between this story and MacDonald's 1879 novel is clear. What strikes one is both the closeness and the distance between the two stories: the shape and essence of Hogg's tale had clearly embedded itself in MacDonald's mind, but he was able to thoroughly refashion it with a completeness which hints to us, once again, how his literary imagination was drawn to story shapes (from ballads, from German literature, or wherever) so as to recreate them for the sake of the essential truth which he perceived within them.

With *Sir Gibbie*, MacDonald seems to be turning to the more generalised rendering of the Aberdeenshire scene which would mark most of the Scottish novels of the 1880s and 1890s. A partial exception is *Heather and Snow* (1893), to which I shall return. That apart, Scotland's north-east corner became for many readers, one suspects, simply George MacDonald's Scotland, established in the public consciousness by the novels of the 1860s and 1870s. One can still feel their Aberdeenshire quality, if one knows the region – the prominence of castles in these novels, for one thing, chimes with a regular feature of Aberdeenshire tourist advertising. But the fascinating actuality of the earlier novels has gone, and one feels that MacDonald is now content to rely on

[15] James Hogg, 'Duncan Campbell' in *Winter Evening Tales*, in Ian Duncan (ed.), (Edinburgh, 2004), 80–97.

the impressions left in an old man's memory. His literary 'Scotland' has transformed into something more like fairyland, or the landscapes of the *märchen* which always made up part of his consciousness.

But in any case, something else is going on in his Scottish novels. Their worlds contain at least one further layer of meaning. Consider again those first reactions to the Scots speech in his earliest novels. The speech of his Scots characters was instantly recognised as 'peasant', 'regional', and 'northern', even in comparison with the Scots of Walter Scott, or Hogg, or Galt. Victorian readers had made their peace with the dialects of these southern Scottish writers but often found MacDonald's a continuing hurdle. Even a particularly sympathetic reader, Margaret Oliphant, was still complaining in 1875:

> Why will Mr MacDonald make all his characters, almost without exception, talk such painfully broad Scotch? Scotch to the finger-tips, and loving dearly our vernacular, we yet feel necessary to protest against the Aberdeen-awa' (is it not Aberdeen?) which bewilders even ourselves now and then, and must be almost impossible to an Englishman.[16]

Yet MacDonald persisted and by the 1880s reviewers were apparently becoming more tolerant of his 'northern dialect of Scottish', and of 'his mastery of the peasant tongue of that region'.[17] Even when his novels became less geographically precise and lost the topographical specificity of his best work, his dialect retained qualities of north-east speech which continued to colour it for southern readers. For many Victorian readers, it would appear that, by and large, MacDonald's 'northern' twist on literary Scots dialect was one of the less welcome aspects of his regional particularism.

In *The Idea of North*, his stimulating and wide-ranging study, Peter Davidson explores how the concept of a region to the north of one's own known world has had powerful resonances from the earliest times to the present.[18] Meanings and associations ascribed to the idea of the north have varied widely across time and individual perceptions but have always been part of the framework within which we locate ourselves in the world. Davidson alludes to various traditions in thinking about northern-ness, picking out, on the first page of his first chapter, one of the earliest and most powerful strands of thought as one in which the north is 'a place of austere felicity where virtuous peoples

[16] Quoted in Letley, 90.

[17] Ibid., 92.

[18] Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (London, 2005). Hereafter 'Davidson'.

live behind the north wind and are happy'. He talks of 'the idea of north as a place of purification, an escape from the limitations of civilization', and of 'the cleansing properties of the northern wind'.[19]

I have referred to ways in which southern readers seem to have regarded Victorian Scotland, especially in a religious connection, a conception which may explain the apparent confidence MacDonald had in offering his southern characters and settings spiritual help and salvation from his saintly Scottish characters. But I suggest that MacDonald was not simply taking advantage of an established pattern of thought regarding Scotland: the idea of the north seems to have been of particular significance to him. His most obvious expression of his vision of the importance of the north, of course, is the famous book apparently foreshadowed by Davidson's ancient Greek writers. *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) is a children's novel – a work of fantasy – which memorably tells of the experiences of a little London boy, the son of a cab-driver, who is visited at night by the beautiful female North Wind and taken by her on aerial journeys across the globe. On one, she even carries young Diamond so far north that he eventually reaches the land at the back of the north wind. This is not Heaven – MacDonald never tries to envisage Heaven, but always sees the regions or states to which he believes we travel after death as simply further stages on that unimaginable journey. But it is at least part of the way there.

And it involves death. As North Wind journeys to the Arctic with Diamond, she becomes progressively weaker until she is reduced to a corpse-like state in which she can go no further. Famously, too, North Wind is portrayed as dealing death, and in a storm she sinks a ship with all hands. At another level, Diamond's journeys with North Wind, we come to realise, are bouts of his progressive weakness and illness brought on by the poverty-stricken living conditions he endures with so many others of his class and time: North Wind, in prosaic reality, is the cold draught over his bed at night, from which his poor family home cannot protect him. Victorian attic bedrooms must often have been draughty places. The novel is the tale of a dying child, and the region at the back of the north wind is where he (and we?) go after death. The awfulness and terror of death is acknowledged in the book: insistently present, central — but not dwelt upon. Death is being placed in a much larger context, namely that of MacDonald's vision of Christian reality, not blithely optimistic but curiously hopeful and reassuring, and the paradoxical juxtaposition is the

[19] Davidson, 21.

spark to his strikingly imaginative creativity. North Wind, and the land behind her back, is incomprehensibly various, loving and deadly at the same time. The far north is equally wonderful and deadly, as befits a region (or a direction) which brings a Victorian believer closer to God.

Scotland, and particularly MacDonald's Aberdeenshire version of it, partakes of some of this mix of associations. As Davidson states, '[f]rom the south, Scotland is inevitably hyperborean' (Davidson, p.233). And even readers brought up in the south of Scotland and its central belt felt confronted by the particularity of MacDonald's Aberdeenshire in its various guises. For Davidson, the 'Jacobite and dissident north-east of Scotland, seen from the Lowlands, was far away and austere, less foreign in language than the Western Highlands, but still an outward-facing outpost of the kingdom of winter' (Davidson, p.234). He elaborates the point: '[w]ithin Scotland, the north-eastern counties of Aberdeenshire and Moray are perceived as lost, grim, especially at the mercy of the weather. For all the unstable prosperity caused by the oil in the North Sea, Aberdeenshire is seen from the Lowlands as impossibly northern, impossibly distant and provincial' (Davidson, p. 245). Natives of the North-East, aware of the beauties and richness of the region (beauties and richness which Davidson acknowledges), may feel a little surprised and hurt by this description, but it surely contains some truth even today. Even now, this is a part of Scotland which seems to have comparatively little appeal to visitors, and so (in the great scheme of things) it is still somewhat little known. What proportion of MacDonald's first readers, one wonders, had ever set foot in Aberdeen, or Huntly, or Cullen? Or wanted to?

The distance and unfamiliarity of his northern settings, their qualities of quaintness, otherness, and extra closeness to the natural world in all its only partly-tamed strength and danger, was a central part of his message. Just as Diamond found himself in regions closer to God's reality while North Wind carried him northwards, so MacDonald's readers are invited to travel north, imaginatively, to a surprisingly alien and distinct region. The nearest parallel to Diamond's experience we find in the Scottish novels is towards the end of *Alec Forbes of Howglen* when Alec, shipping as a doctor on an Aberdeen whaler, finds himself abandoned and desperate in the Arctic wastes after a disaster which may perhaps be drawing on the fate of the John Franklin expedition, a mystery with which the Victorians were obsessed for decades after its disappearance in 1845. On the other hand, who knows what tales of Arctic danger the undergraduate MacDonald had picked up from sailors and whalemen at Aberdeen harbour? In either case, it is while isolated in the polar

regions that Alec finally comes to maturity – indeed, he finds there both God and his true love Annie Anderson.

And MacDonald knew that the landscapes of the North-East could be places of danger and death, a fact not always fully appreciated by outsiders. In one of the earliest modern studies of MacDonald's work, published in 1972, Richard Reis was struck, like many readers, by the frequency and vigour with which MacDonald includes natural disasters, especially floods and blizzards, in his Scottish novels.[20] Reis enjoyed them, and thought them well done, but was clearly puzzled a little by their frequency. To him, the possible explanations seemed to be either a need to acknowledge the mystery of the cruelties God occasionally inflicts upon humanity (cf the Lisbon earthquake of 1755) or else simply a desire to liven up the stories with some exciting episodes. Perhaps with Diamond and Alec in mind, another explanation is possible. Both of their journeys involve strain, pain and danger: the bleakness and danger of the north seems to have been an element in MacDonald's conception of closeness to God, and of the revelation of His truth and being. Peter Davidson, we saw, talks of the tradition of the north as a place 'of austere felicity where virtuous peoples live behind the north wind and are happy', and as 'a place of purification, an escape from the limitations of civilization'. The blizzards (as in *David Elginbrod* and *Heather and Snow*) and the floods in *Alec Forbes*, and *Sir Gibbie* and *What's Mine's Mine*, are all, in their various ways, episodes of challenge and purification – elemental experiences which bring out the heroism latent in rescuers, and passages of purifying danger for the rescued. Perhaps the neatest illustration of this line of thought is to be found in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, when young Annie Anderson falls asleep in the igloo built by Alec and is found by him there: she has to be rescued from this perilous, freezing tomb, but wakes to find herself in the nearest thing to heaven – Alec's home – that her miserable young life has offered her so far. Near-death experiences like this seem to be good for MacDonald's characters because they approach God through them, just as death itself will do, as MacDonald conceives it. This novel of 1865 is startlingly prescient of *At the Back of the North Wind* at moments like Annie's rescue from the igloo and Alec's Arctic survival, just as it is a clear parallel to that other fairy-tale account of the perils, hardships and pain of the journey ever onwards to God, this time to the land where the shadows come from: 'The Golden Key'.

One cannot claim, of course, that MacDonald regarded Scotland solely

[20] Richard H. Reis, *George MacDonald* (New York, 1972), 60.

as an austere haven of unalloyed spiritual strength and goodness. There are too many criticisms of the country and its people – often, harsh and deeply felt – for that. One need only think of his various rejections of Scottish religious practices and beliefs, his portrayal of the grasping mean-mindedness of Alec Forbes's foe Robert Bruce (with his name suggesting its own national stereotype), or the slum conditions he depicts in Aberdeen, to realise that he saw the country to the north of most of his readers as very far from perfect. Yet the implication of an underlying nearness to God remains.

If we need further confirmation of the strength of the association, in MacDonald's mind, of northern-ness (with all its associated bleakness and danger) and the reality of God, then we perhaps find it in the second-last of the series of Scottish novels: *Heather and Snow* (1893). This appeared not long before *Lilith* (1895), an utterance which has long been regarded as a particularly urgent vision by MacDonald. Greville's account tells of his father's special conviction, as the book was emerging in its different versions in the 1890s, that it was the result of a mandate direct from God.[21] The sense of a special urgency in *Lilith* itself is clear enough, but I sense it, too, in the otherwise little-regarded *Heather and Snow*. One understands how easy it is to overlook this late novel: its characters and situations can too easily seem to be a re-hash of episodes and motifs long familiar to readers of MacDonald's fiction. Thus we find once more the mentally-impaired holy fool, the aristocratic bounder who has to be given a holy whipping, the demonic mother-figure whose malevolence almost destroys her offspring, the destructive preoccupation of the worst characters with their class-superiority, the motifs of the proper riding of a horse and of punishment for any stupid cruelty towards the animal. Once again, a young hero awakes (like Alec) to find himself left behind and isolated in a situation of extreme danger: this time, the episode occurs during the Indian Mutiny. Once again, MacDonald imagines the surprise discovery of a nearly dead intruder unconscious in a tomb-like burrow, from which a resurrection can follow. Yet again, a flawed young hero must learn God's ways before he can be married to the infallibly right-thinking heroine. All in all, it can seem to be a mere re-opening of MacDonald's box of favourite tricks, an indication of the author's limitations rather than a fresh inspiration.

Yet against the odds, a sense of freshness and vigour emanates from the book. The enthusiasm with which MacDonald retells yet again a story made from elements which have haunted his writings for so long is itself testament

[21] GMDW, 548.

to the urgent truth he clearly believed inhered in them. If he is telling the same story yet again, it is because, for him, there is only one story to tell about the relationship between human beings and their maker. But what marks the novel despite the hackneyed nature (to put it cruelly) of its narrative is the importance of its setting. It is the most committedly and avowedly northern, and Scottish, of his later fictional landscapes. The title is apposite: the Scotland that MacDonald requires to convey the essential reality of God's dealings with his creatures is reduced to two principal elements of bare northern moorland. And MacDonald's refreshed commitment to his conception is particularly clear, for the book marks a retreat from the generalised vagueness of the Scottish landscapes of *Castle Warlock* and *What's Mine's Mine*. Anyone familiar with the landscapes of the Scottish north-east is likely to realise that the bleak, high-lying basin surrounded by low hills and dominated by one peak in particular — MacDonald labels it the Horn — is a rendering of the moorland plateau to the west of Huntly called the Cabrach, with its prominent peak the Tap o' Noth. The firmness with which MacDonald utilises this setting resides not simply in his faithfulness to the bleak natural elements of this northern location but is also found in his prominent use of the idiosyncratic archaeology of the region with its 'weems' or souterrains which were a known feature of the area by Victorian times. The solid specificity of the book carries its own guarantee, but at one point we even find MacDonald confirming that this is a place he has actually tramped: he describes a little hollow near the top of 'the Horn' 'which, the one time I saw it, reminded me strongly of Dante's *grembo* in the purgatorial hill'.[22] He is returning to part of his childhood northern landscape with a renewed urgency. And this, in turn, brings home to us just how important a part landscape had always played in all the Scottish novels earlier in his career. Containing as it does the most ferocious of all the great snowstorms of his fiction, *Heather and Snow* is perhaps the last of his explicit attempts to drag his readers northwards to God.

And for MacDonald, it was the completion of a circle. His student commitment to Universalism, which landed him in trouble with his Aberdeen minister, was based on the controversy sparked by James Morison who, as independent minister of the Cabrach parish from 1839, sparked a local evangelical revival centred round the belief that Christ died for all, a view and movement which rapidly achieved national notoriety. The roots of MacDonald's clearest and deepest religious ideas appear to have sprung from

[22] George MacDonald, *Heather and Snow* (London, 1893), 95.

the Cabrach's lonely northern landscape, or at least were given form and force by Morison's example. *Heather and Snow* was, perhaps, his return to the earliest impulses of his life's work.

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