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Introduction: George MacDonald's Scotland

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Although revered globally for his fantasy writing and awe-inspiring religious vision, the Scottish texts of George MacDonald (1824-1905) are amongst the North-East of Scotland's best kept secrets. Pulling into Huntly, Aberdeenshire – the rural town of MacDonald's birth – there is little to indicate the connection to the region's celebrated son: visitors making a pilgrimage to Duke Street to see the building where MacDonald was born are welcomed by signs outside the town displaying the expression 'Room to Roam', taken from MacDonald's seminal work *Phantastes*. Even at the University of Aberdeen's King's College, where MacDonald was educated in the first-half of the 1840s, there is little trace of him around the ancient campus. Whilst the cobbled streets themselves are evocative of scenes from his early Scottish novels, the only visible indication that he spent his formative years at the institution is portrait of the author, bearded and with a dignified gaze, hanging towards the rear of Elphinstone Hall.

Writing to Helen MacKay Powell in 1883 from Bordighera, Italy MacDonald highlights the significance of place in fiction before complaining of a sense of disconnection from his native land. He states: 'I am often terribly hampered in my stories by sheer ignorance. I have seen so little of Scotland or any other place. Aberdeen, Banff, Cullen & Huntly are the *only* places I knew when I left at twenty'.[1] MacDonald spent a relatively short period of his life in Scotland, relocating to the intellectual hub of London to study for the ministry at Highbury College. MacDonald went on to settle briefly in Manchester and Hastings before returning to London, and visited much of Europe during holidays. With his wife Louisa, MacDonald embarked on a lecture tour of America in 1872–1873. MacDonald eventually moved to the warmer climes of Italy in 1880, where he remained for more than twenty years.

Herein lies an incongruity: despite all of MacDonald's travels, depictions of Scottish rural and urban life, Scots dialect, tradition, and myth are abundant

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[1] Glenn Edward Sadler, *An Expression of Character: The Letters of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids, MI., 1994), 309.

in his writing. A vivid sense of place can, as David Robb has reminded us, be found throughout MacDonald's early Scottish novels. For Robb, '[e]ven readers unfamiliar with Aberdeenshire can sense how precisely MacDonald locates his characters in landscapes and townscapes which are part remembered, part imagined in accordance with the needs of each book.'[2] Novels such as *David Elginbrood*, *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, and *Robert Falconer*, each written long after MacDonald had left Scotland behind, revolve entirely around their Scottish settings. Although his Scottish work is often overlooked, it is no exaggeration to state, as MacDonald's son Greville argued in his biography of his father, that '[h]is novels, not only those which, conceived in his native country, inaugurated a new school of Scottish Literature'.[3] Scotland as a place is a fundamental element of MacDonald's aesthetic, which he drew upon time and again throughout his life and literary career.

The articles that comprise this special issue of the *Journal of Scottish Thought* originated from a three-day conference held at the University of Aberdeen in 2017. Drawing delegates from all over the world, scholars at this event explored MacDonald's Scottish heritage – a relatively overlooked theme in the field of MacDonald studies – and illuminated some fascinating connections that go beyond merely the setting of MacDonald's work.

Within this collection, the idea of a Scottish identity is explored in several papers. David Robb's discussion of MacDonald's representations of the Scottish landscape and language places him alongside the likes of Robert Burns, James Hogg, Sir Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Sharin Schroder examines MacDonald's representation of his Scottish identity as expressed while living out-with Scotland, and compares this depiction of Scotland to those of Margaret Oliphant, MacDonald's contemporary and mentor. John Pazdziora discusses the formative nature of the Scottish literary landscape and the use of landscape in MacDonald's writings to allow for the contemplation of nature. The importance of the landscape surrounding Huntly, as the burial place of MacDonald's ancestors and close family, is highlighted by Joshua Rawleigh in his reading of the concept of home in *Lilith*.

MacDonald's engagement with the cultural and intellectual atmosphere of Scotland forms a separate grouping of papers. Jennifer Koopman looks at MacDonald's use of the Doric dialect and poetic expression in relation to the debates surrounding literary representation of dialects. The influence of the Celtic tradition is discussed by Adam Walker in relation to MacDonald's use of

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

[3] Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London, 1924), 1.

otherworlds and Per Klingberg examines the influence of the Scottish fairy tale tradition on MacDonald's short story 'The Carasoyn'. Colin Manlove traces how MacDonald's understanding of scientific concept of electromagnetism and the growing awareness of the quantum universe are represented in 'The Golden Key' and *Lilith*.

Some of the contributions expand our understanding of George MacDonald's Scotland beyond national boundaries. In his paper, for example, Maxim Medovarov explores MacDonald's theology in relation to Eriugena's response to *apokatastasis* and universal salvation. Franziska Kohlt looks closely at the shared literary visions of MacDonald and William Morris, using the little-known fact that they both, at separate times, lived at the same address in Hammersmith as a lynchpin to her argument. Moreover, Elena Pasquini analyses of the significance of the angel creatures of *Phantastes*, while Oliver Langworthy provides a fascinating insight into the author's knowledge of the language and literature of Ancient Greek in his examination of the protagonist's name Anodos. Timothy Baker also examines MacDonald's knowledge of other cultures, discussing the extent of MacDonald's engagement with German Romanticism. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, an understanding of the polymorphic nature of George MacDonald's Scotland necessitates a totally interdisciplinary approach that is free from preconceptions about what it is exactly that constitutes 'Scottishness'.

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