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George MacDonald To Thomas Carlyle: An Unpublished Letter and A Missing Note

With the publication recently of the first four volumes of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, it is perhaps not too anticipatory to print a partial correspondence between Henry Cecil and George MacDonald to Thomas Carlyle, which may prove helpful and of interest to future readers of the Carlyle letters (and of the forthcoming edition of MacDonald's).¹ In 1876 (April 19) Henry Cecil, a long-time friend of MacDonald, wrote gratefully to Carlyle, from Bregner, Bournemouth, about his "reading aloud to my dear wife, ill with the accursed disease . . .", from *Frederick the Great*; "a strange book, for such a hearer, at such a time? I have not found it so. The vivid presentment of life and its conflicts is especially welcome (to the healthier natures I think) when the personal earthly existence is threatened with disappearance, and sick with decay" There follows Cecil's deeply personal reaction to the book: "It is a strength besides, like that which the bravest men derive from standing shoulder to shoulder in the battle, to see not how, not heroes only, but tens of thousands of common souls have faced death in noble scorn of everything but the obvious, instant *duty*" Cecil's sensitive reading of the "five volumes", which he was unable to finish before his wife's death, demonstrates an alert feeling for the German (even to the point of concern over the correct pronunciation of words ending with "—ow") meaning in it, and is interesting for at least two broader reasons: Cecil's letter gives an unguarded statement on the Victorian attitude toward death and duty, a "mystical determinism" which links Carlyle and MacDonald to their German counterparts; MacDonald's letter to Carlyle raises also the question of Carlyle's missing response, a letter which must have been, due to the death of Carlyle's own wife ten years previously, elegiac and provocative, catching him in a fine mood.

On 22 April 1876 Cecil wrote again to Carlyle, this time of "how your priceless little note of this morning goes home, dovetails into the intimate knowledge and personal love which has lighted our long reading of you together through the valley of the shadow of death. You would have some faint idea of what your life's work has been, and how

1. Professor K. J. Fielding has kindly assisted me in compiling information presented in this note. All letters here printed are by permission of the National Library of Scotland and the MacDonald one by Colonel Maurice MacDonald. Currently I am editing "The Letters of George MacDonald: to and from His Friends."

there is no gift that a man of genius can bestow upon the world comparable for a moment to the true gift of *himself*" Some months later Cecil shared his "priceless little note" with MacDonald, whose daughter Mary Josephine was then dying of the same disease; finally Cecil asked MacDonald to kindly return it. Unfortunately, however, MacDonald had mislaid Carlyle's note; thus he wrote, in apology to him, from Corage, Boscombe, Bournemouth ² (April 23, 1877):

Honoured Mr. Carlyle,

I am driven to trouble you. Hear my story and bear with me, for I come in humility. Some little time ago, an old friend of mine, Henry Cecil, wrote to you, telling you how he and his wife, upon her deathbed, had been reading together your Frederick the Great. I did not know of it when he wrote, and am not now sure whether it was before or after his wife's death.³ He received from you, with your own signature, a very kind note which is, I need not say, prized very highly—alas, that I have to use the past tense!

A few months ago, he showed me this note, and I begged to be allowed to keep it a while that I might show it to a friend of mine who, unknown to you, owes you the greatest thanks a man can pay to his fellow man. I did so with all satisfaction to him and me.⁴ But the sequel is of another sort. This evening Cecil asked me for the note. A misgiving crossed me even then. I have searched for it everywhere, in vain, and my distress is greater than I should like to set forth in words. For the knowledge of the loss will be to him a keen pain, as it is to me. He is but a middle-aged man, and will I trust, for his children's sake, live many years yet—be yet in the strife and the cloud of the battle when you have had the *well done* from the lips of the Master, and all the time your note would have been a possession. My heart is sore for my fault and his loss. I am not a careless man, but here is carelessness. I have lost my evening's work, which to a man who works steadily, is no little punishment. But the loss of tomorrow's is threatened also by my mental disquiet, and the only thing that has brought me relief is the thought of troubling you—happily not with the heartache I beg you to take from me. Now to put my request plainly—a cry to my big

2. The MacDonalds lived near the Cecil's at Boscombe, renamed by MacDonald, "Corage" as part of an anagram on his name: "Corage! God mend all!"

3. Mrs. Cecil died on July 19 (1876) and Cecil wrote to Carlyle of her death: "She listened, with interest (for *my* sake the last readings as long as she could), but we never finished Frederick."

4. Possibly the unidentified "friend" was Mr. Cowper-Temple, a close friend of the MacDonalds who was holding some religious conferences at Broadlands in 1877; also MacDonald was seeing John Ruskin, who had become interested in "a society spiritualistic medium" there.

brother to come to my help. Will you, out of your humanity, dictate again a few words to my friend, founded on the contents of this letter, and send it with your own autograph signature to me, that I may give it to him instead of the other. Then I shall have courage to confess my failing. Do not write a word to me: I do not deserve it. I am ashamed of thus troubling you. But some day, I trust, on the other side, I shall thank you for a kindness which lightened a real burden, when our life here has become the dream which real as it is, Novalis says perhaps it ought to become.

Sincerely I pray you to pardon me for thus intruding myself on you, but sorrow is bold.—The God you have served be with you.

I am, dear Mr. Carlyle,
Yours not the less respectfully that
I venture to say lovingly,
GEORGE MACDONALD

Apparently, Carlyle granted MacDonald's request, for MacDonald wrote to Cecil, from Porto Fino (September 23, 1878):

Best thanks for the good news, and God be praised. He takes a long time, but he does not forget it. I have had few such keen trouble, as that was to me, and now that is over, with the result at least that your kindness and generosity to me in the affair has drawn my heart nearer to yours. . . .

One wonders, however, if (a) the original, missing note from Carlyle was ever found and what it contained; (b) what did Carlyle say, if in fact he replied to MacDonald's moving request; either letter would indeed be worth finding.

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