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Jamie Rankin

**The Genesis of George MacDonald's Scottish Novels:
*Edelweiss Amid the Heather?***



As novels go, it reveals a rare attraction to hearth and home: the plot emerges within a richly illustrated vision of country life and custom, with each simple meal, each homespun witticism, each ploughing of the fertile earth breathing deeply of country air. Its characters, true to life, range from the eccentric to the humdrum, from the deceitful and avaricious to the simple-hearted and virtuous. The narrator evokes them with the same telling eye for detail that renders the lavish depictions of the countryside so convincing and immediate. Indeed, the plot itself becomes almost incidental to the setting. When the action does assert itself into the foreground, it provides cameo performances of the pleasures and hardships of rural life, of family loyalties and moral choices, against a backdrop of fields, farmsteads, and ever-changing skies. The primary spotlight throughout rests on a fatherless boy who sinks into alcoholic excess and immorality, but who rises into maturity with the help of an older mentor and a girl who loves him. Dialogue throughout the novel is often related in the familiar local dialect, forming a discourse at once intimate yet vaguely distanced by its precise localization. And binding all together is the narrator's insistent efforts, like those of a provincial divine, to point out the lessons to be learned in the scenes he has just portrayed.

Readers familiar with George MacDonald's *Alec Forbes of Howglen* will recognize the description immediately. Here MacDonald's descriptive power and sympathetic characterization touch the essence of his beloved

rural Scotland. His treatment of the main characters—Thomas Crann, Tibbie Dyster, Annie, Cosmo Cupples and Alec himself—draws the reader with compelling veracity into their milieu of Scotch Calvinism, poverty, and underlying good will. Though MacDonald originally conceived the title to read "The little grey town," readers of *Alec Forbes* ever since its appearance in 1865 have agreed that it forms one of the most colorful tributes to Scottish rural life that MacDonald was ever to write. Indeed, his considerable reputation as a novelist derives primarily from this and the other early Scotch novels (*David Elginbrod* [1863] and *Robert Falconer* [1868]), in which MacDonald's contemporaries saw a worthy continuation of the narrative tradition associated with no less a writer than Sir Walter Scott. In the words of MacDonald's contemporary critics:

So far as the Scottish stories are concerned, we think them in their way perfect. They are veritable transcripts of Scotch life...

...delineations of Scottish scenery, and of Scottish life and manners, more remarkable than any which have appeared since the time of Scott...

No more remarkable pictures of Scotch life and customs have been given to the world than those by this author...

In scenes of still life...he is inimitable. Since Sir Walter Scott, no Scotchman has so well portrayed his countrymen.¹

A generation after MacDonald, his son Greville could comment, with no intention to exaggerate: "His novels...inaugurated a new school in Scottish literature."² He refers here, no doubt, to what came to be known by its adherents as the "Scottish Movement," by its detractors as the "Kailyard School."³ Another turn-of-the-century writer argues for MacDonald's influence in this regard specifically:

¹"A great Scottish Teacher," *The Speaker*, 86 (March 16, 1901), 382; "Works by George MacDonald," *The British Quarterly Review*, 47 (January 1, 1868), 3; Charles Simmons, "George MacDonald and his writings," *Universalist Quarterly*, 41 (January 1884), 57; John Dyer, "The New Novelist," *The Penn Monthly*, 1 (June 1870), 221. For these and other citations from contemporary critics, I am indebted to the research staff at the Wade Collection, Wheaton College (IL).

²Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife* (London, 1924), p. 1.

³For recent discussion of the "Kailyard," see Eric Anderson, "The Kailyard Revisited," *Nineteenth-century Scottish Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Campbell (New York, 1979), pp. 130-47; and Ian Campbell, *Kailyard* (Edinburgh, 1981).

Those who talk today of Mr Barrie's having revived the taste for the Scotch novel are sadly astray. They forget that for more than a quarter of a century thousands of people have been reading the novels of George MacDonald.⁴

And modern critics, notably Manlove and Wolff, echo this praise of MacDonald's narrative power to evoke the richness of Scottish country life as summarized at the outset.⁵

The novel described above, however, is not *Alec Forbes* at all, nor a novel by MacDonald or even a Scotch novel, but rather *Ulric the Farm Servant* (*Uli der Knecht*, 1840)—a narrative that enjoyed immense popularity in Switzerland and Germany during the mid-1800's.⁶ It is perhaps the best-known novel of Jeremias Gotthelf (Albert Bitzius, 1797-1854), and established Gotthelf's reputation first in Switzerland and later in Germany as a dominant figure in the literature of the German *Biedermeier*.⁷ The hapless youth in this case is not Alec but Ulric (Uli); for Annie we have Vreneli; in place of Cosmo Cupples there is the wise farmer, Johannes; and the town of Glamerton in Aberdeenshire is here the *Glungen*, a fictitious farming community set in Gotthelf's own Emmenthal.

Such obvious echoes cry out for explanation. But if MacDonald's novel seems to mirror Gotthelf's in numerous details, it does so no less than do the two men's lives, and it will prove helpful to note first the bio-

⁴"The Founder of the New Scottish School," *The Critic*, 30 (May 15, 1897), 339.

⁵See Colin Manlove, "George MacDonald's Early Scottish Novels," *Nineteenth-century Scottish Fiction: Critical Essays*, pp. 68-88. Manlove speaks warmly of MacDonald's "extraordinary ability in his portrayal of Scottish and interrelationships" (72) and discerns from this MacDonald's "real claims to literary stature" (70). See also Robert Lee Wolff's important study of MacDonald's fiction, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven, 1961): "It is not the main story, or even the protagonists, that make *Alec Forbes* an arresting novel, but MacDonald's picture of Scotch life and character" (209).

⁶This and all subsequent references will be to the standard critical edition of Gotthelf's works: *Sämtliche Werke in 24 Bänden* (Zürich-Erlenbach, 1911-77), ed. Rudolf Hunziker, Hans Bloesch, Kurt Guggisberg, Werner Juker; including volumes I-XXIV, and supplemental volumes (EB) 1-16. *Uli der Knecht* is Volume IV. All English renditions are my own.

⁷Critical studies abound on the *Biedermeier* and its individual authors. The best-known (and most exhaustive) is by Friedrich Sengle, *Biedermeierzeit: Deutsche Literatur im Spannungsfeld zwischen Restauration und Revolution 1815-1848*, 3 Vols. (Stuttgart, 1971-80).

graphical and then the textual parallels.⁸ Born a generation before MacDonald into a family with deep religious convictions, Bitzius grew up in the countryside around Berne and later was trained in philosophy and theology at the city's university seminary. As a student and later as a vicar, he displayed a religious and pedagogical fervor that was unaccustomed in the Swiss Reformed Church, and found himself often at odds with its coldly orthodox leadership. Perhaps as a result of this, perhaps due to an acknowledged weakness of voice when preaching, at first no parish in the canton of Berne would take him on. His impatience grew until finally the Emmenthal village of Lützelflüh offered him a position. He accepted and (unlike MacDonald) served there for the rest of his life. Quite like MacDonald, however, he remained happily married to a woman who was at once his wife, companion, literary critic, and inspiration. While engaged in the work of his rural parish, he felt an irrepressible urge to speak to the societal ills he saw around him—lack of concern for education, mistreatment of servants, child abuse, alcoholism, greed, and the like—and did so through a series of parable-like, didactic narratives set in the Switzerland of his day. He wrote his first novel under the pseudonym "Jeremias Gotthelf"—with conscious reference to the fiery Old Testament prophet—and came to be known more by that name than his own. As with MacDonald, the impetus for his writing grew out of a desire to effect positive change—

The whole world pressed upon my heart: where I could be of help, I took it upon myself to enter the fray; where I witnessed injustice, it made my hair stand on end; where I perceived stupidity causing others to suffer, I lashed out at it, driving myself with vehemence and abandon... (EB 9: 285-86)

—a sentiment that bears comparison with MacDonald's comment: "I don't in the least care to amuse people, I only want to help them up."⁹ And like MacDonald, Gotthelf subsequently adopted a militantly didactic, while thoroughly poetic, narrative voice. He once wrote to a friend:

Sometimes it seems to me that all I really want is a trusty mount and a good sword, and to ride out and attack the devil and worldliness [*Teufel und Welt*], and to see amidst the good fight the flowing of my black red blood. (EB 6: 208)

⁸For a recent biography of MacDonald, see Elizabeth Saintsbury, *George MacDonald: A Short Life* (Edinburgh, 1987). English readers not familiar with Gotthelf may wish to consult a useful, though now dated, study of his life and writing: Herbert Waidson, *Jeremias Gotthelf: An Introduction to the Swiss Novelist* (Oxford, 1953).

⁹Frances Brookfield, "George MacDonald at Bordighera," *Sunday Magazine* (London), 34 (April 1905), 401.

His chosen weapon against these evils being the fictional text, he wrote over the course of eighteen years no less than twelve major novels, some forty novellas, and scores of anecdotal tales. Each evokes with clarity, humor, and obvious fondness the Bernese countryside of the early 1800's, while depicting with profound psychological insight a wide range of human emotion and conflict. Yet the distinguishing feature of Gotthelf's fiction is its overtly didactic intention. Each tale carries with it a message, a point to be learned, that pervades both the plot and the authorial commentary laced through it. Gotthelf's early works, such as *Der Bauernspiegel* and "Dursli der Brannteweinsäufer," focus on the problems of child abuse and alcoholism; in *Geld und Geist* the parabolic plot sequence functions as a warning against avarice and parental neglect; in *Anne Bäbi Jowäger* the narrator pleads for genuine piety as opposed to spiritual arrogance; and his last novella, "Die Frau Pfarrerin," provides by means of a positive exemplum an exhortation to a life of humility, selflessness, and contentment. Some of his tales incorporate Swiss legends ("Der Ritter von Brandis"), some draw on Bernese history ("Elsi, die seltsame Magd"), but all revolve around the village life he himself knew first-hand and many incorporate a unique blend of standard German and Gotthelf's native *Bärndütsch* dialect. More important, all are didactic, showing characters of either increasing wisdom or folly, and display vigorous passages of normative commentary throughout. They all reveal a churchman intent upon preaching—with a narrative voice no doubt stronger than Gotthelf's physical voice could ever become. Manlove's telling comment that for MacDonald, "the novels were...a substitute for the pulpit he had lost, a means of teaching by pleasing imitation,"¹⁰ applies, save for the lost pulpit, equally well to Gotthelf.

Given this general similarity of socio-linguistic background, didactic intention and literary means, what are we to make of the more specific parallels between MacDonald's novels set in Aberdeenshire, and Gotthelf's novels of the Emmenthal—in a word, of the bond between Alec and Ulric? Either we must conclude that the similarities of narrative structure, setting, didactic voice, dialect usage, even (in the case of *Alec Forbes*) the emphasis within the plot on alcohol abuse, are coincidental and testimony only to certain stylistic means and social concerns in the air during the mid-1800's; or we must speculate that MacDonald knew of Gotthelf's writings and wrote his initial Scotch novels along the lines established by his Swiss predecessor. In this study I wish to explore the latter view. What we know of MacDonald's writing suggests, first, that conscious adaptation of literary sources—and specifically German-language sources—charac-

¹⁰Manlove, p. 69.

terizes much of his *oeuvre*; second, that MacDonald's narrative strategy undergoes a significant change prior to the appearance of *Alec Forbes* and the Scotch novels to follow; and third, that this change occurs during the time when MacDonald befriended John Ruskin. The point of interest here is that it was Ruskin who introduced Gotthelf to English readers. And thus we have a triangle: one side formed by the friendship of MacDonald and Ruskin, one side by Ruskin's unreserved praise for Gotthelf, and the third joining Gotthelf back to MacDonald. This third side is speculative, to be sure; but the strength of certain biographical and textual evidence surrounding the other two makes it a speculation worth pursuing.

The suggestion that MacDonald borrowed from another author will come as no surprise to readers familiar with his early works. His own reading was extensive, exhibiting what C. S. Lewis refers to in a biographical sketch as the Scot's "passionate love of hard-won learning."¹¹ In part from MacDonald's own comments, in part from epigraphs interspersed throughout his early fiction, and certainly from the stories themselves, one can discern a mind familiar with diverse languages, philosophies, and genres. A critic writing as early as 1868 could comment:

Perhaps the first impression derived from a perusal of George MacDonald's writings is that of their originality; but along with this impression comes another..., namely, that the mind of their author has been the subject of many and varied influences, and that the originality by which it is now distinguished folds up in its embrace a host of derivative elements.¹²

What strikes one particularly in this regard is the sheer range of these "derivative elements." Numerous critical studies have traced strong connections between MacDonald and authors as diverse as Boehme, Spenser, and Carlyle, and show particularly strong ties with the Romantic writers of England and Germany.¹³ MacDonald made ample use of Novalis, Chamisso, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Jean-Paul Richter, and Ludwig Tieck on

¹¹C. S. Lewis, ed., *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York, 1947), p. 12.

¹²"Works by George MacDonald," p. 1.

¹³See "Works by George MacDonald," pp. 2-3; Aline Faben, "Folklore in the Fantasies and Romances of George MacDonald," Diss. SUNY/Buffalo 1978, pp. 14-37; Michael Mendelson, "The Modernization of Prose Romance: The Radical Form of William Morris and George MacDonald," Diss. Washington State University 1981, pp. 110ff.; Nancy Mann, "George MacDonald and the Tradition of Victorian Fantasy," Diss. Stanford University 1973, pp. 74-83; and Wolff, chs. 2-3.

the one hand, and Coleridge and Wordsworth on the other. What is more, in some cases these influences involve not merely an echo of an idea or the suggestion of a narrative stance, but the incorporation of substantial elements (e.g., themes, narrative structures, even plot sequences) from someone else's work into his own. Readers of *Phantastes*, for example, have recognized in MacDonald's romance a faithful mirroring of the dream landscape in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, as well as extensive borrowing from Hoffmann's *Der goldene Topf* [The Golden Pot] and "Die Bergwerke zu Falun" [The Mines of Falun].¹⁴ Crago points out the passage from Dickens's *Great Expectations* that apparently lies at the root of MacDonald's fairy tale, "The Day Boy and the Night Girl."¹⁵ Similarly, Henry More's *An Antidote against Atheism*, itself drawing heavily on Miranda's version of the tale (1612), informs MacDonald's "The Cruel Painter."¹⁶ And there is good reason to believe that the parallels between MacDonald's youthful hero Sir Gibbie and Huckleberry Finn can be traced back to MacDonald's friendship with Mark Twain and a proposed collaboration.¹⁷ To be sure, MacDonald's drawing on these and other sources in no way detracts from his genius, for in combining them with his own ideas he often imparts to them a new and original vigor. The dark side of German Romanticism lurking in the narratives of Hoffmann, for example, is so illuminated by the light of MacDonald's indomitable faith that one hardly recognizes MacDonald's appropriations as such. Nonetheless, the pattern of discovery, adaptation, and utilization of another writer's material established itself early on in MacDonald's career and made its mark on poetry and fiction alike.

If during these first years of writing MacDonald drew on a wide variety of sources, he expressed the resulting synthesis in an equally wide variety of literary forms. This initial "experimentation," as Faben describes it,¹⁸ stemmed no doubt from both his lack of experience as well as his fascination with diverse literary genres. During the years 1855-60, while ap-

¹⁴See Wolff, pp. 45-73 (Novalis); and pp. 88-91 (Hoffmann).

¹⁵H. Crago, "Charles Dickens and George MacDonald: A Note," *Dickens Studies*, 5 (1969), 86-7.

¹⁶Coleman Parsons, "George MacDonald and Henry More," *Notes and Queries*, 188 (May 5, 1945), 180-83.

¹⁷Kathryn Lindskoog, "Huckleberry Finn as Morality Tract and an audacious proposal regarding its origin," *Books & Religion*, 13 (Nov./Dec. 1985), 13-15.

¹⁸Faben, p. 38.

parently casting about to find the most suitable medium for his poetic message, he tried his hand at no less than seven distinct forms: short poems (notably his wedding poem to Luisa Powell, "Love me, beloved"), verse drama ("Within and Without"), the romance novella ("The Broken Swords"), blank verse narrative ("A Hidden Life"), the Gothic ghost story ("The Portent," 1860), fairy tales ("The Light Princess"), and his best-known work from this period, the dream romance of *Phantastes*. It is important to note that the narrative fiction of these early years was devoted primarily to the fantastic, either in the form of fairy tales and dream narrative (such as we find in *Phantastes*), or in the more subtle and disturbing style of E. T. A. Hoffmann, whom MacDonald emulated in several works. When the action in his early fiction did take place in the "real" world, it was set in England, or elsewhere in Europe—but rarely in Scotland. Nor do we find any significant use of Scots dialect. MacDonald in this experimental phase apparently preferred to write about the English, speaking English, living in England.

With the exception of "The Portent," a short tale first published serially in the *Cornhill* magazine of 1860, no works appear during the years 1858-62—a period, as Wolff comments, of "false starts and frustrations" for the fledgling author.¹⁹ And then, unexpectedly and without personal precedent, MacDonald begins producing one novel after another set among the moors, villages, and grey-stoned cities of his native Scotland, the first of these being *David Elginbrod* (1863). From the standpoint of narrative structure, the difference between this novel (at least Book I) and its predecessors from MacDonald's earlier fiction is striking. Gone are the mesmerists, the vampires, the cursed and cracked mirrors; and in their place we find a humble Scottish cottage, porridge and oat cakes, and a cast of characters who speak the "braidest" of "braid Scots." More important, MacDonald's authorial emphasis lies no longer on the fantastic, but on such practical issues as education and moral discernment, and on spiritual questions, most notably the fatherhood of God. MacDonald emerges, as it were, from the dark labyrinths of German Romanticism to explore a new narrative territory. In place of the symbolic translucence of *Phantastes* we find now a realistic and overtly didactic plot sequence (Hugh teaching Harry/Hugh learning to love Margaret/David writing to warn Hugh); and instead of a distanced and objective narrator we find liberal use of normative commentary interspersed throughout the text, particularly in Book I, to ensure that the reader should apprehend the "right" message from the text. Both in its painstaking realism and its broadly didactic focus, the

¹⁹Wolff, p. 109.

opening chapters of *David Elginbrod* mark a radical departure from the fiction of MacDonald's earlier years.

One must stress that this transformation holds true primarily for Book I, and not for the whole. In Books II and III, MacDonald returns to a plot structure more reminiscent of E. T. A. Hoffmann than Sir Walter Scott. Once again we find him dealing in the Gothic/Romantic elements of mesmerism and seances, setting up a plot sequence in England, and employing a narrative language free of Scots-dialect influence and equally free (at least in Book II) from the intrusions of a normative authorial voice. At times, to be sure, the "new" narrative style introduced in Book I prevails in Books II and III, particularly during Hugh's attempts to educate Harry, and in the narrator's mocking depiction of the Appleditch family. And there are brief echoes of Scots dialect in Books II and III as Margaret relates her father's wisdom to Euphra. Yet Books II and III suggest only a peripheral relation to Book I, despite the narrator's protests to the contrary, and could possibly have been conflated with Book I (witness the blunt and awkward introduction of Margaret into Book II) to form an acceptably lengthy narrative. One is tempted to speculate that MacDonald wrote, or at least conceived, the plot of books II and parts of III much earlier, and combined them with an opening sequence (now Book I) issuing from an altogether new narrative perspective. But regardless of the novel's genesis as a whole, Book I of *David Elginbrod* signals a new narrative stance for MacDonald, one that dominates the novels to follow. Thus it is this novel, and not "The Portent," as Wolff suggests, that "occupies a transitional place between the fairy-tales and the Scotch novels."²⁰ For with the appearance of *Alec Forbes* in 1865, all trace of MacDonald's dependence on German Romantic models has vanished. Wolff is not overstating his case when he notes that "a reader coming fresh to *Alec Forbes* would never suspect that its author had read Boehme, Novalis, or Hoffmann."²¹

Nor has this departure and its concomitant preference for narrative prose over poetry gone unnoticed in the critical literature. Studies that trace MacDonald's literary development have been quick to ask why MacDonald abandoned (at least temporarily) his poetry and shorter prose, and devoted himself to the genre of the Scotch novel. To that, MacDonald himself provided at least one answer, if we are to believe the account of an anonymous journalist:

²⁰Wolff, p. 117.

²¹Wolff, p. 207

"As to myself," answered Dr. MacDonald [in an interview with the journalist], "I had no choice. I had to write for money and prose pays the best..."²²

This echoes Greville MacDonald's explanation, who quotes the publisher George Murray Smith saying once to his father:

"If you would but write novels, you would find all the publishers saving up to buy them of you! Nothing but fiction pays. Yet I will publish any of your poetry."²³

Thus it seems to have been for financial reasons that MacDonald put his poetry temporarily to rest and took up fiction—or, in C. S. Lewis's view, that he was "seduced into writing novels."²⁴ Yet the monetary impetus, while wholly consonant with what we know of MacDonald's life, does not answer all our questions concerning the texts themselves. It may well be that he felt compelled to write in a genre that would sell more readily. But why not then continue to write novels set in England, where by far the greater market for his works would be, and focus on English life? This MacDonald could do, and indeed did do, once his novels began to sell. But immediately following what Wolff terms the "sterile years of 1858-62,"²⁵ MacDonald chose to write a very specific kind of fiction, (for him) a very new kind, and one that eventually gained him a widespread and favorable reputation: the Scotch novel. Greville MacDonald notes that "his sense of art in fiction changed extraordinarily in those five years [1858-63]"²⁶ and few students of MacDonald would contradict him on this point. But what prompted this change?

It is here that MacDonald's friendship with John Ruskin takes on significance. Greville MacDonald devotes an entire chapter of his biography to this relationship, a bond that began in 1863 and continued for several decades through periods of chronic physical illness for one and debilitating mental anguish for the other. While noting that MacDonald receives almost no attention in the definitive edition of Ruskin's works, Greville as-

²²"George MacDonald," *Book News*, 127 (March 1893), 304.

²³Greville MacDonald, p. 318.

²⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London, 1958), p. 232. Other factors, such as adverse criticism of *Phantastes*, have been cited as well; see Roland Hein, *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids, 1982).

²⁵Wolff, p. 112.

²⁶Greville MacDonald, p. 324.

sure us that there was "a big correspondence that passed between the men," and in fact ranks Ruskin, along with A. J. Scott, Greville Matheson, and F. D. Maurice, as one of his father's "choicest friends."²⁷ In the early summer of 1863, Ruskin accompanied the mother of Rose LaTouche to one of MacDonald's lectures at Tudor House, where the Oxford don, even then intermittently plagued by depression, found himself immediately drawn to the kindness of the MacDonalds. His letters to MacDonald during the months following this introduction express repeatedly a strong emotional bond: "I'm grateful to you for loving me, and...hope to see more of your kind faces, yours and your wife's," and again, "Mind you're not to mind saying you love me." They bear testimony as well to his inability to respond in kind: "I'm so puzzled by everything, and so dead to everything..."; "[I] shall be grateful for all the love—and *expression* of it you can give me—only I've no love, to speak of, to give in return."²⁸ In Ruskin's letters to other friends he voices similar sentiments of gratitude toward MacDonald: "If Mr Macdonald is with you, give him my love.—I do love him, he has been very true to me."²⁹ The MacDonalds in turn entertained Ruskin in an effort to ease his emotional torment and became deeply involved as mediators in his tragic courtship of Rose LaTouche. Wolff notes that they went so far as to arrange "interviews between the ill-assorted pair of lovers after Rose's parents had forbidden them to meet."³⁰ Though Ruskin repeatedly asserted his aversion to Christianity, even the seemingly liberal Christianity espoused by MacDonald, the latter asked Ruskin to be godfather to his son Maurice. In a letter as remarkable for its honesty as for its blatant cynicism, Ruskin refused.³¹

²⁷Greville MacDonald, p. 328; p. 192. Ruskin's *Works* appeared during the first decade of this century, before Greville MacDonald had compiled his biography (1924), and thus these letters, as well as many to be published in later collections (see below) were not available to Cook and Wedderburn. Those critics who write of Ruskin and MacDonald generally focus on the latter's role in the tragic courtship of Ruskin and Rose LaTouche, and do not suggest the possibility of Ruskin's influence on MacDonald's literary development. Saintsbury's biography of MacDonald goes beyond the Ruskin/LaTouche affair to delineate several ideological differences between the two men, but even here we find no discussion of possible influence on MacDonald's writing.

²⁸Taken from letters quoted by Greville MacDonald, pp. 329-32.

²⁹John L. Bradley, ed., *The Letters of John Ruskin to Lord and Lady Mount-Temple* (Columbus, 1964), p. 256 (letter dated 19 January 1870).

³⁰Wolff, p. 227.

³¹Van Akin Burd, ed., *The Winnington Letters: John Ruskin's Correspondence with*

While Ruskin looked to MacDonald for emotional support, he in turn provided the struggling author with what financial and vocational help he could. Over the years he loaned the family money, arranged for MacDonald to travel through Switzerland in 1865, wrote a warm recommendation that same year on behalf of MacDonald's bid for a professorship at the University of Edinburgh, and confided in MacDonald as perhaps in few other men. Touching on the depth of confidence between the two men, Wolff suggests that MacDonald in fact incorporated Ruskin's sexual struggles into his novel *Wilfrid Cumberland* (1872).³² MacDonald, himself as sure of God's love as Ruskin was skeptical and as happy in marital love as Ruskin was despairing, showed himself nonetheless to be a sympathetic, patient friend. A sonnet that remained unpublished in MacDonald's lifetime bears witness to his understanding of Ruskin's temperament, and his belief that in this, as in everything else, all would be well:

O friend, since I have seen thee this fair day
 The day is fairer; for its golden show,
 Long ere the evening, rosy all doth glow:
 Thy face hath changed it—though it be not gay.
 Not as a bridegroom's clad in radiant play,
 But calm and strong, serene, divinely slow,
 With sorrowing smiles that to my bosom go:
 Thy soul looks forth crowned for a kingly sway:
 Some men would hold thy sun was in the west,
 And hid with rosy clouds, its dying head
 Flushed with the blood thy trampled heart hath shed,
 Weary with waiting and not being blest:
 I say 'tis morn that dawneth in thy breast
 Though dark-plumed night would brood the glory dead.³³

Ruskin's commentary on MacDonald's writing is apparently limited to scattered brief references in his letters and an evaluation in an Oxford lecture citing MacDonald's *Diary of an Old Soul* as "one of the three great religious poems of the [19th] century."³⁴ Such scant acknowledgement of MacDonald's literary work stems from the particular nature of the friend-

Margaret Alexis Bell and the Children at Winnington Hall (Cambridge, MA, 1969), pp. 486-7 (letter dated 13 April 1864).

³²Wolff, pp. 268ff.

³³J. H. Whitehouse, "Ruskin and George MacDonald," *The Athenaeum* (June 24, 1920), 834.

³⁴"A Prophet in Modern Fiction," *Current Literature*, 39 (November 1905), 509.

ship: Ruskin looked to MacDonald for emotional support rather than intellectual stimulation. Yet one would expect that their discussions were not limited to confessions and counseling; that mutual literary concerns must have been touched upon as well. What Ruskin discussed in private with MacDonald concerning the latter's writing we can only conjecture, yet it would be odd if Ruskin had not mentioned to his friend the Swiss author whom Ruskin had come to admire, whose life and outlook so closely resembled MacDonald's own, and whose novels in fact Ruskin was reading during the period of his most frequent visits with MacDonald.

Indeed, it requires no great effort to trace the Ruskin-Gotthelf side of the triangle. We know from Ruskin's considerable commentary on European literature that he held Jeremias Gotthelf in high esteem and had done so ever since he first read him while traveling with his family in Switzerland. Cook mentions that Gotthelf's works, translated into French during the 1850's, became part of the Ruskin family's "traveling library."³⁵ Ruskin himself recalls reading Gotthelf in Fribourg in 1854; writes to his father in 1858 extolling Gotthelf's literary finesse; and notes in his diary for 1860 that he spent an evening reading *Anne Bäbi Jowäger* to his mother.³⁶ In Ruskin's view (and typical of his tendency toward idealization), Gotthelf personified the truly noble human spirit. The Swiss pastor/author was a man of letters, articulate and forceful in expression, indeed, according to Ruskin, "the greatest of Swiss authors"; but also a man acquainted with hard manual labor, "a farmer of shrewdest and most practical skill."³⁷ One senses that Ruskin's appreciation of Gotthelf seems to issue more from an affinity with Gotthelf's outlook than a critical appraisal of Gotthelf's writing, yet Ruskin spared no praise in hailing Gotthelf as one of the greatest writers of the century. His comments in this regard, recorded in *Modern Painters, Notes*, (for the 1878 Bond Street Exhibition), and *Fors Clavigera*, speak for themselves:

His real name was Albert Bitzius...In character he was a combination of Scott and Sydney Smith, having the penetrative and imaginative faculty of the one, with the practical common sense of the other.

³⁵E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 Vols. (London, 1903-12), Vol. 32, p. xxxii (editorial note).

³⁶Ruskin, *Works*, 32, xxxii (editorial note); John Hayman, ed., *John Ruskin: Letters from the Continent 1858* (Toronto, 1982), p. 65 (letter dated 30 June 1858); Joan Evans and J. H. Whitehouse, eds., *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, Vol. 2: 1848-1873 (Oxford, 1958), p. 596.

³⁷*Works*, 13, 491; 27, 546.

Of this author I will only say that, though I am not prejudiced in favour of persons of his profession, I think him the wisest man, take him all for all, with whose writings I am acquainted...

[The tale] is characterised throughout by a restrained tragic power of the highest order...

[He gives us] portraiture, exquisite in its sympathy, lovely in its delicacy, merciless in its veracity...

...the most wholesome balance of the sentimental and rational faculty I have ever met with in literature.

As studies of general human nature, I know nothing but Scott's soundest work which can compare with these books.

Read Gotthelf's *Ulric the Farm Servant* on this matter. It is truly one of his great novels,—great as Walter Scott's in the truth and vitality of it...

Now all the beauty of Protestantism you will find embodied by two great masters of historical symbol: namely, by Scott in the character of Jeanie Deans...and in Continental literature by Gotthelf in the character of Freneli...

...a record of Swiss character not less valuable in the fine truth than that which Scott has left of the Scottish.³⁸

In similar passages, Ruskin places Gotthelf in the good company of Molière, *Don Quixote*, Zenophon (whose *Economist* was to be followed in the library of the Guild of St. George by *Ulric the Farm Servant*)—just as he places him here in particularly close proximity to Sir Walter Scott. Critics today would surely demur; but in light of the campaigns that Ruskin felt obliged to wage against "modernism," mechanization, and urbanization, and considering his equally ardent pursuit of a "peasant nobility," Gotthelf—and Gotthelf's novelistic characters—provided an ideal ally. Conveniently enough, Gotthelf and his fictional world were located in Switzerland—the land closest to Ruskin's ideal—and indeed in that very part of Switzerland that Ruskin himself found least spoiled by the ravages of supposed progress. As for Gotthelf's literary abilities, I have intimated that the Swiss writer often leaves much to be desired. Certainly his style is uneven, his predilection for strident didacticism proves annoying to the point of being unpalatable for some readers, and his use of dialect renders

³⁸*Works*, 32, 344; 27, 545-6; John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 5 (London, 1843), 430n; *Works*, 32, 345; 27, 632; 32, 345; 28, 492; 33, 506; *Modern Painters*, 5, 429-30.

much of his early fiction incomprehensible to the non-Swiss. Yet critics agree that Gotthelf does in fact possess considerable narrative depth, an extraordinary ability for characterization, and an innate power in his language, which at its best has been compared to the epic sweep of Homer. His narrative style is at once complex and transparent, his characters provincial and universal, and he is difficult to categorize.

But Gotthelf's actual stature as a writer is not in question here, rather Ruskin's estimation of his stature; and Ruskin was convinced that Gotthelf was a great author. As great, he notes repeatedly, as Sir Walter Scott—which brings us back to George MacDonald and to speculations on how Ruskin might have been instrumental in introducing MacDonald to Gotthelf. For if Ruskin admired the Switzerland portrayed by Gotthelf, we may surmise that he had hopes of seeing this literary tradition continued by so fitting an author and moralist as MacDonald. It seems inevitable that Ruskin would have brought the two men together in his own thinking, and from there, in discussions with MacDonald himself. Once again, what Ruskin may actually have mentioned to MacDonald concerning Gotthelf we can only conjecture: perhaps the Swiss author's eye for natural beauty and the richness of his local color, the exquisite detail in his rendering of rural conditions, his thorough-going didactic narrative style, the potential appeal of realistic characterization and development (Ruskin admired Gotthelf's heroine "Vreneli" from *Ulric* so deeply that he named a newly-discovered Swiss mountain flower after her), or perhaps the nuances of dialect manipulation, insofar as Ruskin could appreciate them through the French translation. It is reasonable to assume, at the very least, that Ruskin would have mentioned Gotthelf to MacDonald prior to the trip Ruskin arranged for him to the very canton of Switzerland where Gotthelf had lived and written only a generation before. And surely it is more than coincidental that this excursion to Gotthelf's homeland coincides neatly with the appearance of *Alec Forbes* (1865), written in a novelistic style highly reminiscent of the Swiss author. From that point on, MacDonald showed himself as capable of creating developmental novels set in his native Scotland as Gotthelf was predisposed to write *Bildungsromane* from the Emmenthal.

This much is speculation. We can discern clearly, however, the textual echoes of Gotthelf's style that resound in MacDonald's fiction during the years 1863-65. They recall the didactic, structural, and linguistic manipulations used so characteristically by Gotthelf, and now so characteristic of MacDonald's own style. Compared with the early fantasy writings, the didacticism takes on a more confident tone: MacDonald preaches freely in the Scotch novels, both in his authorial commentary, and by way of the normative views expressed within the fictional world by characters such as

David Elginbrod, Cosmo Cupples, and Robert Falconer. In addition, MacDonald begins during these years to make use of narrative framing devices, allowing one narrative level to give rise to another, as in the structure of *Adela Cathcart* (1864) and in "Papa's Story" (1865). The latter novella in particular displays a frame structure remarkably similar to that used in Gotthelf's many *frametales*. Most obvious, however, is the unleashing of the "Scottishness" that was only hinted at in MacDonald's previous works, giving rise to tales set exclusively in Scotland, portraying faithfully the customs and characters reminiscent of MacDonald's own upbringing, and making free use of Scots dialect in dialogue. It is in this regard that MacDonald approaches most closely the textual pattern used repeatedly by Gotthelf, and perhaps Ruskin's fondness for Scott and Gotthelf pushed him this way.

While this feature figures prominently in the opening section of *David Elginbrod* (highlighted in fact by the subsequent reversion to the former "English" setting) and consistently through *Alec Forbes*, the nuances of MacDonald's new "Scottishness" are best noted in the narrative evolution of "The Portent." MacDonald first wrote the tale for the *Cornhill* of 1860; but a second, much revised version appeared in book form in 1864—after MacDonald had made Ruskin's acquaintance. With regard to the first version, one may concur with Wolff that it is a "first-rate little Victorian ghost story"³⁹—highly reminiscent of Poe, and laden with elements of Hoffmann. The story opens in Scotland, where the "portent" has first been heard—the mysterious and ominous sound of a galloping horse, signalling imminent danger to the family of the protagonist/narrator. From there the action moves swiftly to England, where the narrator takes on a tutoring post with a wealthy family, falls in love with the daughter, and succeeds in controlling her by way of mesmerism. Shocked at first, the daughter eventually comes to love him and they continue to meet at night in a secret chamber of the house. But her father, who opposes the prospects of such an unequal union, finds them out, bursts in upon their tryst, knocks the protagonist senseless, and leaves him for dead out on a nearby moor. The young man revives, only to realize that the girl he loved has perhaps been lost to him forever. Though he searches for her throughout Europe, he cannot find her and ends his narration in a tone of despair as he longs for a reunion: "I wait—I wait."

On a first reading of the 1864 version, it would appear that MacDonald's revision of the story serves merely to lengthen it. The action continues beyond this baleful "I wait" and leads to a new and far happier ending. The narrator returns to his native Scotland, finds out by way of a woman

³⁹Wolff, p. 115.

with the Highland "second sight" that the daughter is now back home, returns to England to take her, and eventually carries her off to marriage and happiness. The addition makes no improvement on the story, to be sure, and one may even agree with Wolff that it does just the opposite. Yet it provides insight into the kinds of changes MacDonald chose to make on stories he had written earlier. The most obvious and pervasive emendation is a new breath of Scottish scenery, folklore, and language, issuing not only from the plot additions just described, but from descriptive gestures added to the original opening scenes—gestures that recall vividly the narrative style and local color of Jeremias Gotthelf. The text of 1860, for example, mentions sporadically only the most essential elements of the narrator's Highland home: "Heath" / "moor" / "a Highland nursery" / "whin-bush and elder-hedge."⁴⁰ The revised text of 1864 reveals a far more lavish treatment:

...a wide expanse of moorland, rugged with height and hollow, and dangerous with deep, dark pools, but in many portions purple with large-belled heather, and crowded with cranberry and blaeberry plants. (1)

The narrator of the 1860 text refers to his familial roots in vague, general terms: "Except a few acres of arable land at its foot, a bare hill formed almost the whole of my father's possessions" (617). The narrator of 1864, however, emends the passage to identify himself closely with his Scottish ancestry: "My father belonged to the widespread family of the Campbells, and possessed a small landed property in the north of Argyll" (1). And whereas the narrator of 1860 states at the close of his story with sad finality, "I left my home, and have never visited it since" (630), the narrator of 1864 chooses to portray the Scotland to which he now returns in vivid, concrete descriptions:

The cottage of Margeret...lay unchanged, a grey, stone-fashioned hut, in the hollow of the mountain basin. I scrambled down the soft, green brae... (92)

...their Highland breakfast...a glass of peaty whisky. (100)

...overlooking the loveliest of the Scotch lakes. (131)

⁴⁰*Cornhill* (May 1860), pp. 617-8. All citations of the 1860 version refer to the story's serial publication in the *Cornhill*: "Its legend," (May, 1860), 617-30; "The Omen Coming On," (June, 1860), 670-81; and "The Omen Fulfilled," (July, 1860), 74-83. Citations from the 1864 version refer to *The Portent and other Stories* (London, 1924).

He mentions in addition "flour-scones and butter" and "clean white mutch," he pauses later upon his return to Scotland to provide a detailed description of a local fair, and relates in rich Scots dialect the ballade of "Annie of Lochroyan" (60). All of this does little to improve upon the contrived plot, of course; yet it serves to draw readers into the life of the protagonist in a way that differs substantially from a reading of the 1860 version. There the plot centered on the familiar Romantic devices of mesmerism and somnambulism; here we still find these, but embedded in a text that places equal emphasis on the folklore of the Scottish highlands, notably the phenomenon of the Highlanders' "second sight," evincing an unabashed pride in Scottish tradition. Wolff comments that the story

strikes strong Scotch notes. The loving descriptions of Scotch scenery in the early portions...testify to MacDonald's own first discovery of the inspiration he might find in his native land.⁴¹

Wolff fails to note, however, that the majority of these "loving descriptions" appear only in the second version. Thus the chronology of the tale's evolution suggests that MacDonald's supposed "first discovery" of Scottish inspiration may have been a vicarious one, inspired itself by Gotthelf's narrative model.

By suggesting above an additional influence, I hope to place in context the nature of MacDonald's possible knowledge of Jeremias Gotthelf. If there was in fact such knowledge, and a subsequent appropriation of Gotthelf's narrative techniques, it remains simply that: an additional, and by no means a primary, influence. For although *Alec Forbes* and its kin reveal notable parallels to Gotthelf's tales of Uli and Vreneli, MacDonald's novels and their constituent parts belong undeniably to the Scottish author. His unique tie to the land and the sea, to the character and language of the Scots, forms an unmistakable signature on the Scotch novels that no mention of secondary sources can obliterate. Regardless of the influence that may have opened his eyes to the narrative potential afforded by his native land, MacDonald's works remain strikingly his own. In addition, one must bear in mind that MacDonald returned to his previous narrative strategies after only a few years. The Scotch novel became one of many narrative possibilities in a remarkably wide repertoire, as MacDonald went on to write fairy tales, poetry, and sermons; essays on criticism, theology, and hymnody; as well as the novels—both English and Scottish—that established his reputation. For many readers, both those con-

⁴¹Wolff, p. 116.

temporary with George MacDonald and those in our own day, these additional genres attract little interest. Most will agree that the Scotch novels, together with *Phantastes*, form his most significant narrative achievement.

He was most at home, as far as the poetry and fantasy are concerned, when writing with symbols. His novels suggest, in turn, that he felt equally at home conjuring up the kailyard and the kirk. Before we cite him as a founder of the "Kailyard School," however, we should consider that Jeremias Gotthelf was also adept at writing about *Kohlen* and *Kirchen*; and that the evidence suggests that MacDonald may well have shared the cabbage plot as well as the church pulpit with the Swiss divine.

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