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Daniel Boice

A Kind of Sacrament: Books and Libraries in the Fiction of George MacDonald

"Collecting jewels in a rather irregular fashion,"¹ is how G. K. Chesterton describes reading the fiction of George MacDonald, whose wordiness is indisputable, but whose literary gems continue to excite interest. Chief among the jewels is a remarkable, often startling use and recurrence of settings, character types, and, especially, symbols. Castles, attic bedrooms, tutors, reflected light, and stairways appear often in MacDonald's novels, and have provoked much speculation and discussion. Also appearing with notable frequency are books and libraries, certainly not the most common of literary settings or symbols. For MacDonald, libraries show up time after time as vitally important settings for his dialogue and action. C. S. Lewis, a critical admirer of MacDonald, notes, "The image of a great house seen principally from the library and always through the eyes of a stranger or a dependent (even Mr. Vane in *Lilith* never seems at home in the library which is called his) haunts his books to the end."²

Unfortunately, his celebrated use of libraries has served mainly as fuel for scholarly debate on whether or not MacDonald himself worked in a library. MacDonald's son and biographer, Greville, believed that his father had indeed, between sessions of college, spent time cataloguing a private li-

¹Introduction to Greville MacDonald's *George MacDonald and his Wife* (London, 1924), p. 13.

²In his *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (Garden City, NY, 1947), p. 12.

brary in the north of Scotland, and buttressed his contention with citations from MacDonald's novels.³ Greville's thesis has been accepted by nearly all of MacDonald's biographers, including Robert Lee Wolff, who, in his psychoanalytical study of MacDonald, not only accepts the library theory, but rather stridently insists on all sorts of amorous adventures during MacDonald's stint at the castle.⁴ On the other hand, Muriel Hutton, a librarian at Yale, has examined MacDonald's letters, but cannot confirm the library job.⁵

Interesting as this ongoing discussion is, it overlooks entirely the significance of the library itself as a critically important setting for MacDonald. The fact that MacDonald used libraries so frequently should not be seen only as grist for biographical mills, but should indicate that he intended something and signified something besides a vivid memory of a short period of his life. For, if literary use were a measure only of experience, one would expect MacDonald to set more stories than he does in churches, an important and painful part of his own life. Why then, of all places, libraries? It would be well to recount some of the examples of MacDonald's use of libraries, to see whether or not any pattern or meaning can be seen.

Two years after the publication of his first book, *Phantastes*, MacDonald published in *Cornhill Magazine* a three-part short story, which he later expanded into a short novel, *The Portent*.⁶ Eighteen-year-old Duncan Campbell, unable to procure a commission in the army, becomes a tutor at Hilton Hall, and is shocked by "the neglected library," in which the "books were in great confusion." Duncan seeks and obtains the permission of the lord to "arrange and catalogue the books during my leisure hours." Maybe not the expected recreation of a teenager, but Duncan attacks the project with spirit: "Now I was in my element. I had never been by any means a book-worm; but the very outside of a book had a charm to me. It was a kind of sacrament—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; as, indeed, what on God's earth is not?"⁷ And it is in the library that Duncan first

³*George MacDonald and his Wife*, p. 72ff.

⁴*The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven, 1961), pp. 16-17.

⁵"The George MacDonald Collection," in *Yale University Library Gazette*, 51 (1976), 75.

⁶*The Portent: A Story of the Inner Vision of the Highlanders Commonly Called the Second Sight* (London, 1864).

⁷Pp. 81, 82, 83.

has a conversation with Alice, a conversation that dramatically changes both of their lives.

In MacDonald's first conventional novel, *David Elginbrod*,⁸ young Hugh Sutherland arrives as a tutor at Arnstead, a manor in Surrey. *David Elginbrod* is a remarkable tale with wonderful characters and memorable action, much of which occurs in Arnstead's library, which MacDonald describes as "a long, low, silent-looking room, every foot of the walls of which was occupied with books in varied and rich bindings. The lozenge-paned windows, with thick stone mullions, were much overgrown with ivy, throwing a cool green shadowiness into the room" (p. 224). The library serves as Hugh's classroom while at the manor, as well as the setting for numerous dialogues and weird seances.

MacDonald's 1865 novel, *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, is perhaps the best of his conventional novels, and again uses a library for important action, even managing to discuss a second one! When young Alec arrives in the big city to begin his college career, his landlady directs him for academic advice to a fellow tenant, Mr. Cupples, noting for Alec's confidence, "He's a kin' o' librarian at yer ain college i' the noo, Mr Forbes."⁹ Cosmo Cupples is certainly not the stereotypical librarian, for his chief pastime seems to be getting drunk at night in his filthy room. The college, having lost its librarian, has hired Cupples on a temporary (and low-paying) basis, and Cupples spends his days "re-arranging the books and the catalogue, both of which had been neglected for years" (II, 50). In fact, during the day, Cupples is sober, industrious, and enjoying every minute of his work. Alec soon begins helping Cupples with the cataloguing, but learns to let Cupples handle "mending old covers, mounting worn title-pages, and such like . . . Books were Mr Cupples's gold and jewels and furniture and fine clothes, in fact his whole *gloria mundi*" (III, 9). Moreover, Cupples "was full of information about books, and had, besides, opinions concerning them, which were always ready to assume quaint and decided expression" (II, 50).¹⁰

It was Cupples, as he tells Alec, who had taken the position at the "grit leebrary i' the far north." As Cupples tells it, "It belonged to a grit an' gran' house . . . Weel, I wrought awa', likin' the wark weel, for a buik's the bon-

⁸(London, 1863).

⁹(London), II, 50.

¹⁰Among Cupples' best dicta, this on mice, "To whilk I'm a deidly enemy ever sin they ate half o' a first edition o' the *Fairy Queen*, conteenin' only the first three buiks, ye ken, o' whilk they consumed an' nae doot assimilated ae hail buik an full a half o' anither" (III, 67-8).

niest thing i' the warl' but ane . . ." (III, 66)¹¹ In fact, the only bonnier thing is a woman, which leads Cupples to relate his own unfortunate love affair, the end of which had occurred in the library. It was the memory of that embarrassing event that not only made Cupples flee the college library at dusk, but had also driven him to his alcoholic condition.

Of course, the book ends on several happy notes, and Cupples, after giving up the demon whiskey, is appointed as college librarian, and MacDonald describes what must be his own version of an ideal librarian:

From the moment of his appointment, he seemed to regard the library as his own private property, or, rather, as his own family. He was grandfather to the books: at least a grandfather shows that combination of parent and servant which comes nearest to the relation he henceforth manifested towards them. Most of them he gave out graciously; a few of them with much reluctance; but all of them with injunctions to care, and special warnings against forcing the backs, crumpling or folding the leaves, and making thumbmarks (III, 243).

In *Alec Forbes*, like *The Portent* and *David Elginbrod*, there are important conversations and scenes in the library, but here, for the first time, is a real librarian whose part in the life and salvation of Alec is critical, and whose opinions are generally delightful.

Wilfred Cumbermede,¹² published seven years after *Alec Forbes*, introduces another amateur librarian like Duncan of *The Portent*. As a child, Wilfred is more interested in swords than books, but in the long Scottish winter he teaches himself to repair paper and eventually, like Mr. Cupples, book binding (pp. 37-8). After graduation from Oxford, and having launched a slow but promising career as a writer, Wilfred takes an active interest in the library of Moldwarp Hall, which is near to his boyhood home. The library at Moldwarp is in terrible condition, and the books are in no order at all, so Wilfred volunteers to clean, repair, and catalogue the library himself. Nor will he accept payment, though the work could take months, for "the pleasure of seeing order drawn from confusion would itself repay me" (p. 257). At last, one of MacDonald's characters explains the need for a properly catalogued library: Wilfred tells a maid, "Books are very much like people, Mrs. Wilson. There are not so many you want to know all about; but most could tell you things you don't know. I want certain books in order to question them about certain things" (p. 264).

¹¹This is the basis for much of the biographical speculation by Greville MacDonald and Robert Lee Wolff, their only disagreement being the degree to which Cupples' tale is autobiographical.

¹²*Wilfred Cumbermede: An Autobiographical Story* (Boston, nd).

The labor is indeed a long one, involving remodeling and carpentry, and, in the process, a number of critical dialogues and several adventures occur in the library. The similarities of the scenes, as well as the by-now familiar character of cataloguer, are not the only points of interest of *Wilfred Cumbermede*. Several other things in the story are interesting, such as the name of Wilfred's beloved horse, Lilith, a name which was later to supply him with the title for a novel. MacDonald gives an intriguing description of the library, noting that it had spread from its original room, and now occupied "half a dozen rooms, some of them merely closets intended for dressing-rooms, and all very ill-lighted." Also, MacDonald describes his ideal of a library, which "should be on the ground floor in a quiet wing, with an outlook on grass, and the possibility of gaining it at once without going through long passages" (pp. 81-82). Such a library would appear again.

Donal Grant, written in 1883,¹³ takes up the story of its title character from *Sir Gibbie*. Donal, a shepherd, obtains a college education and leaves the herds in order to be with books, whether in libraries or bookstores, and becomes an independent tutor. His goal is to be sent to a place "with a good library, where he could have all the use of books without buying" (pp. 18-19). Donal, too, knows the value of proper storage of books, for "without a place to keep them, books are among the *impedimenta* of life" (p. 19). Donal obtains a position at a castle, "Graham's Grip," but little happens in the "fine library—useless to be sure for the purpose of any modern study, but full of precious old books" (p. 249), a library described only as containing "dark oak cases and old bindings" (p. 379). Again, the image of a tutor and a castle library are familiar.

In his 1891 novel, *There and Back*,¹⁴ Richard, the hero, picks up from his uncle the craft of book binding and, like Wilfred Cumbermede, teaches himself paper restoration, becoming very skilled in both techniques. When Richard returns to his ancestral estate, Mortgrange, his first impression of the library is a good one: it is a large room with plush carpeting, tall windows, and "floor to ceiling" books (p. 54). Alas, the books are disintegrating, and Richard strikes a deal with Sir Wilton Lestrangle to repair the damaged books, a lengthy project during which, not surprisingly, many important dialogues take place. A large, disorganized library in the great hall, and a hero with the desire and skill to correct matters—the repeated use of this theme must be unique to MacDonald.

¹³(Boston).

¹⁴2nd edn. (London).

It is in his final major work and arguably his best, *Lilith*,¹⁵ that a library plays its most important role, and here MacDonald finally explains his feelings about libraries and books. Mr. Vane, the protagonist, is newly graduated from college, and spending his days in his library. And what a library! The main room, MacDonald says, was floor to ceiling books, and "like an encroaching state, absorbed one room after another until it occupied the greater part of the ground floor" (p. 3), exactly like Wilfred Cumbermede's, connecting with those rooms "by doors, by open arches, by short passages, by steps up and steps down" (p. 4). In this wonderful library, one room in particular attracts Vane's attention; a small closet containing the "oldest and rarest of the books" has a door with a false bookcase on the front, holding book backs with spoof titles (p. 5). But on top of some of the false books lies half of a manuscript book which seems to be immovable. And it is while studying this closet that Vane meets MacDonald's peculiar librarian, Mr. Raven.

Raven is quite old, and he explains that he had been cataloguing the rare books in the closet some four centuries earlier, when Vane's ancestor, Sir Upward, had shown him a doorway into another world, a world of many dimensions (pp. 38-9). Raven, in fact, turns out to be Adam, and he advises Vane on the other world, as well as on books: "'A book,' he said louder, 'Is a door in, and therefore a door out,'" (p. 40). A door, perhaps, to Raven's world, for we learn that the other half of the manuscript protrudes into that other world. "Ah, the two worlds!" writes Adam, in one of the poems from the manuscript book. "So strangely are they one/ And yet so measurelessly wide apart" (p. 151).

A book figures mysteriously in one of Vane's first adventures. While walking in darkness in Raven's world, his path is lit by a beautiful, fiery bird-butterfly. Entranced by the beauty of the creature, Vane wills it into his hands, but there the bird-butterfly changes into "a dead book with boards outspread," and Vane throws it away in disgust (p. 47). Robert Lee Wolff suggests that this reveals some anti-intellectual bent of MacDonald,¹⁶ but David S. Robb counters that Vane's early actions are wrong by all accounts, and that the book may have been a treasure, unrecognized by the not-yet alive Vane.¹⁷ Given MacDonald's obvious love of books, certainly this is a better theory than Wolff's.

¹⁵*The Visionary Novels of George MacDonald: Lilith, Phantastes* (Np, nd). Interestingly, Wolff rates this masterpiece as the weakest of all of MacDonald's works (*Golden Key*, p. 332).

¹⁶*Golden Key*, pp. 340-41.

¹⁷*George MacDonald* (Edinburgh, 1987), p. 104.

For Vane, the adventures begin in the library, others occur in the library, and, when the book ends, Vane is back in the library, noting that now and then the books "seem to waver, as if a wind rippled their solid mass, and another world were about to break through" (p. 259). *Lilith* is a remarkable book. Adam, the father of us all, as a librarian? Again, remembering MacDonald's many heroes who ordered libraries, and Adam's *naming*, which was in fact an ordering, of the animals, the connection seems logical. But what of the library? What, really, do the library and the book mean to MacDonald? Richard Reis, author of a balanced work on MacDonald, professes himself mystified by the "intense meaningfulness" of the library motif.¹⁸

Perhaps a part of the answer to this question can be found in MacDonald's great children's book, *The Princess and the Goblin*, in which, oddly, there is no library at all. G. K. Chesterton¹⁹ points out that the Princess' castle is an apt metaphor for a person's soul, with unexplored bedrooms and, ominously, goblins scurrying to get through the thin cellar floor. In the novels with libraries, the character of the great house always seems to mirror that of the owner or lord, and the library in particular gives off a clear reflection of that character. Disordered libraries indicate a confused or troubled owner; decaying books are a sure sign of danger within the family. The hero's reordering or repair of the library generally coincides with a return of the house to its rightful condition and a happy ending. So on one hand, for MacDonald, the library serves as a compact measure of both the house and the lord of the manor.

But there is another aspect of the library to MacDonald, one more important than a simple mirror, which may furnish a clue as to why the library figures so prominently in his fiction. In one of their first conversations, Vane, who has stumbled into Adam's world, asks Raven about getting home, and Raven explains about that important place: "Home, as you may or may not know, is the only place where you can go out and in. There are places you can go into, and places you can go out of; but the one place, if you do but find it, where you may go out and in both, is home" (p. 13). Recall also Raven telling Vane that a book "is a door in, and therefore a door out" noted earlier. So a library, by Raven's definition, is a place full of doors in and doors out, and where, as with home, one can go both ways!

¹⁸George MacDonald (New York, 1972), p. 111.

¹⁹Introduction to Greville MacDonald's *George MacDonald and his Wife*, pp. 10-11.

The library, then, is home, perhaps the homeliest place of all.²⁰ This is where MacDonald's heroes feel most comfortable, that is, more at home than in any other room; it is the place which, when in disarray or disrepair, indicates trouble on a large scale; it is where much of MacDonald's key narrative occurs; finally, it is where Adam works and browses. So close to that other, more real world, is the library that some books are half in one and half in the other. When MacDonald closes his last important and his most closely worked book, it is in the library where another world seems "about to break through" (p. 259).

Whether or not he did spend a summer cataloguing a private library in a remote Scottish castle, MacDonald pays special tribute to books and libraries in his fiction. They are certainly more important than the Church, and perhaps even more significant than the Scottish village, so special to his writing. For MacDonald the library was the best home this side of Heaven, and not at all distant from that glory.

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²⁰One might recall Sam Gamgee's exuberant description of Rivendell: "It's a big house, this, and very peculiar. Always a bit more to discover, and no knowing what you'll find round a corner." That, and Tolkien's other descriptions of Rivendell, also known as the Last Homely House East of the Sea, echo the descriptions of the libraries in *Wilfred Cumbermede* and *Lilith*. (See *The Lord of the Rings* [Boston, nd], I, 237-8, *inter alia*.)